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"GOD IS MY WITNESS THAT THIS DEED WAS NOTHING BUT A MISTAKE."

TRUST HER NOT;

Or, A TRUE KNIGHT.

BY MARGARET LEICESTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE POET'S WIFE.

THE long plate-glass windows of Barthold Verne's up-town mansion gleamed upon the gloomy night like the windows of some palace of fire; the soft lace curtains and lustrous azure folds which shrouded them scarce hid from the eyes of the passers-by the gay forms which flitted to and fro, while the softest strains of

German music enriched the air—a voluptuous melodrama to the pageantry.

Barthold Verne's ball-room was considered a triumph of the upholsterer's art; it was modeled from the ball-room in the palace of the King of Holland at Amsterdam. Its ceiling was blue as the azure vaults of heaven, its walls were alternate mirrors and windows, draped with azure velvet folds, and festooned with rich crimson; its floors were of glittering woods, in quaint Dutch mosaics—pink, blue and tender violet—and its three gigantic crystal gasaliers swung by thick crimson-velvet cables, which were held in the hands of silver satyrs set in relief in the azure vault, and bore aloft innumerable crescents of rose-tinted and perfumed tapers, shed-

ding around from every tremulous pendant and glistening facet prismatic rays like founts of living light.

What with the gleaming splendor of this vast apartment, and the rich dresses of its continually winding and unwinding occupants, and the velvet strains of the finest German band in New York, perched yonder in the marble orchestra, half hidden behind a maze of tropical flowers, and the glimpses of distant apartments, carpeted in royal tints, with here and there the gleam and sparkle of silver, and the smiling guests promenading in and out, and the softly-modulated murmurs of well-bred voices everywhere; the scene could have vied with that in many a European court.

Barthold Verne was a noted and successful author, of German origin; he had found time before his fiftieth year to acquire fame and wealth; to travel the world over; to live through a marriage-idyl of passionate sweetness, and to bring up with all tender care and devoted faithfulness their one child—his "Maiblume"—his pure white lily-of-the-valley, plucked, as it were, from the grave of her mother.

Look at her now as she moves through the stately dance; does she not seem worthy of her father's love and of all men's homage? Regal in her form and bearing, with the grace of a Spanish senorita, each gliding step the embodiment of proud stateliness and dignity; from her small richly-tressed head, upon which glittered a wreath of amethyst lilacs, to her foot of Andalusian arch incased in its fairy satin *bottines*—oh, she was beautiful—beautiful! Maiblume!

Her face was like a flower, white, pure and up-looking; her eyes were dark, and lit by splendid fires; her pale-green robes of silken sheen infolded her like the soft sheathing foliage of her name-flower, and when she turned in the slow and sweeping windings of the dance, to give one of her own proud, majestic courtesies to her partner, there was not a gentleman in the room who had the luck to witness the nameless witchery of her motion, who did not forget for the moment his own less brilliant partner in admiration of the glorious Maiblume Verne.

A word about her partner.

A dark, gentlemanly, dashing man, say about forty, hook-nosed, hawk-eyed, with a gracefully drooping mustache, thin, sneering lips, and black hair curling over his collar. A poet was this partner of hers—Paul Stanley—a poet who had long years ago achieved a position among his country's celebrities, and who, like the ancient Dorians, worshiped only the beautiful.

Another pair, who were dancing in the same set with Miss Verne and Mr. Stanley, deserve to be presented to the reader.

These are no less than Mr. Barthold Verne, the owner of the mansion, a tall, portly, well-preserved man, with keen blue eyes and florid complexion, and his favorite guest, Mademoiselle Coila De Vouse, an enchanting little French fairy, who, with long black hair combed down her back, and innocent, pale, confiding face, with her two shy eyes cast modestly down, seemed, in her white dress of priceless lace, with the crimson roses in her breast, no redder than her own lips, and her crimson girdle round her tiny waist, like a child playing at being woman.

This pretty little creature had come to New York fresh from a Parisian boarding-school, to burst upon the delighted denizens of Fifth avenue under the wing of the fashionable and admired Mrs. Stanley wife of the above-named poet.

But hush! No more of biography at present; the music has glided into the stately march, and the dancers are promenading, two by two, round the grand saloon and into cooler apartments beyond.

As Maiblume, leaning on the arm of Mr. Stanley, passes through a flower-wreathed doorway, a young gentleman who has been standing there watching the stream of passers-by steps eagerly forward. He has a handsome, sincere face, a profusion of loose, brown curls, and though he speaks to Mr.

Stanley, his eye falls on Maiblume, and he reddens while he smiles. He is not much older than she is, so she seems not in the least afraid of him, but rather to welcome his approach with a pleasure she is not afraid of showing.

"Mr. Stanley," said he, hurriedly, "I have just come from Mrs. Stanley."

"Ah! and that's where you were, you truant," interposed Maiblume, gayly. "Come, make amends directly, and engage me for the next dance."

"You have just come from Mrs. Stanley?" repeated the harmonious tones of the poet, very gravely, after the lady had quite finished.

"She has been indisposed all day," continued the young gentleman, his fine face positively burning under the cold stare of the other; "I merely happened to go in half an hour ago for that manuscript which you had promised Mr. Verne, and she called me up-stairs to ask me, if I found you here, to tell you that she was ill and out of spirits, and that she hoped you would return to her soon."

While he was speaking, Mr. Verne, with his partner upon his arm, had paused to listen, and now there was a moment's dead silence. It was the common talk that the gifted poet was so weary of his beautiful wife that he continually and cruelly neglected her, and that she, once all the fashion in New York society, had gradually withdrawn herself from its bright circles, the victim of an incurable sadness, with her royal beauty already on the wane.

There was now a red gleam in his eye as it rested full upon that of young George Laurie, Barthold Verne's secretary, and his thin lip perceptibly whitened as he answered, in low, well-bred accents:

"Thanks for your trouble, sir. I shall return to Mrs. Stanley instantly."

With a word of adieu to Maiblume and her father, he disappeared, and George Laurie offering his arm, the young lady took his place and they joined in the promenade.

"Oh, I'm so sorry for dear Mrs. Stanley," said Maiblume; "does she seem very ill?"

"Yes," said George, absently. "Poor lady! poor lady! I beg your pardon," continued he, recalled to himself by Maiblume's exclamation of dismay, and as his glance rested on her lovely face, his eye warmed and the cloud cleared from his brow. "There was nothing special to-night, I think, only she seemed to be realizing more than usual some private trouble of hers, and to be yearning for her husband to help her to bear it."

"Poor, dear Madame Stanley!" Mademoiselle De Vouse was lisping behind them; "how terrible to suffer with nerves as she does; oh, my heart! how terrible!" and she brought her dainty hands together round the arm of the laughing man of letters, while she arched her demure eyebrows and shook her bird-like head in a manner to bewitch you.

Mademoiselle was the honored guest of Mrs. Stanley, and, poor child, must have suffered considerably from the morbid state of affairs in that household, but she was unaffectedly attached to her hostess, and hung round her at home and abroad with the prettiest little clinging ways imaginable.

As to the poet, she seemed thoroughly frightened of him, and ran away whenever he ventured to address her, taking refuge with the elderly author, as if Paul were the wolf who was sure to eat her up—a little Red Riding-Hood.

The sleet was dashing against the windows of Paul Stanley's brown-stone house in one of the quiet aristocratic streets west of Fifth avenue, and, as he stepped shivering out of the shelter of his carriage, across the slippery pavement, he hissed between his teeth:

"Doesn't the chain gall now?"

In a few moments he was standing in his wife's *boudoir*, biting the tips of his elegant mustache, as he gazed at her, lying face down, on an amber-satin couch richly framed in gilt—for he was a wealthy, some said an extravagant man—and his house was

furnished throughout with well-nigh barbaric splendor.

Rosa Stanley had been an English beauty in her day—by her gleaming golden tresses and snow-white, statuesque neck, you could see that, though her face was hidden, and her attitude the very *abandon* of grief. Her long, somber, silken robes fell about her like the motionless folds of a pall. A tangle of rainbow-colored silk lay on the white carpet at her feet, just where it had fallen when, her heart failing her, her eyes growing dim and her fingers losing their power, she had dashed down the work with which she sought to while away the weary hours, and had given herself up to a passion of bitter weeping.

"Rosa," said Paul Stanley, very quietly.

He had come in so noiselessly—his every motion being light and delicate, and the carpet being thick as the moss under the ancient forest trees—that she had never heard him—and started up with a suppressed scream, the tears still raining over her flushed cheeks, her features quivering, and her hands at her throat in hysterical agitation.

"Sweet Niobe, will the fountain never run dry?" inquired the poet, leaning gracefully over the marble pedestal of a gayly-poised Vanity, to look at her with dark and forbidding irony.

For a moment she buried her face in her pocket-handkerchief, then, with a visible shudder, composed herself, and stood up, dizzily holding onto the arm of the sofa, and striving to return his look steadily.

The dimmed, yet noble beauty of the woman might have appealed to his poet soul; the woeful drooping weakness of the woman might have appealed to the man's heart, and, if he had either soul or heart, to think that that beauty was dimmed for him, and that weakness was suffered for him, should have brought him on his knees to her, imploring her forgiveness for all the wrongs he had done her.

Well, well! the world is full of sorrowful hearts, but there comes a day when all their wrongs shall be avenged.

CHAPTER II.

A DREADFUL MISTAKE.

"PAUL," said Mrs. Stanley, in faint and broken accents, "I pray you, for Heaven's sake, be patient with me; be kind for once, and help me to speak out bravely at last." She stopped abruptly, and made a motion as if she would have thrown herself at his feet, but he checked her with an imperious gesture, and folding his arms, gazed at her with an insulting and derisive smile.

"So, my lady wife is about to tell the truth, is she?" sneered he. "And at whose solicitations, may I ask? Not at mine. Since she chooses to have her mysteries, she is welcome to keep them from Paul Stanley."

"Hear me," whispered she, with trembling and colorless lips; "oh, don't frighten me away to-night with my confession still unspoken, as you have so often frightened me away before."

"Stay," said he, with a bitter smile; "may I ask whether this confession has not been poured into the ear of another than your husband already?"

She covered her face with her hands, to hide its burning shame from his pitiless gaze, and a demon of fury seemed suddenly to possess the man. He reached her with one stride and clutched her by the shoulder so fiercely that she writhed from him with a moan of pain, and the comb falling from her tresses, down they fell, glitt'ring and waving far below her waist, while her wild, dark, violet eyes appealed to his mercy, passionately.

He put his foot upon the delicate comb and ground it into the carpet; with dark, fierce hand he dashed aside the heavy masses of her hair, in order to grasp her more firmly by the other shoulder, and bounding over the cowering and half-swooning lady, he muttered, in tones thick with passion:

You've made George Laurie the confidant of

this secret, have you not? I ask you, Rosa, have you not?"

For a few moments all-mastering fear possessed her, and she essayed to speak in vain.

Then she made a mighty effort, and controlled herself, and slowly lifted her magnificent figure to its full height, and erected her proud head with a glance of majestic innocence.

"I repel the insinuation," said she, slowly and clearly. "George Laurie discovered my secret by an accident, and preserved it inviolate through my prayers."

He interrupted her by a furious hiss, but she went on without heeding him.

"You ask me by whose solicitation I am about to make you my confession! I answer, before God and on my knees"—here she tore herself from his grasp and sunk on the carpet, with clasped hands and solemn face, appealing to the heavens through the half-drawn curtains of the window—"I make this confession to you solely at the solicitation of *George Laurie!*"

"Of George Laurie!" echoed the husband, with a burst of most insolent laughter.

"To be sure, my clever diplomat, to be sure! What could be better planned to hoodwink the too suspicious husband than a mock confession prescribed by the favored young Adonis?"

"Be silent, for shame!" cried Rosa Stanley, springing to her feet and towering before him with all the offended dignity of an injured queen. "You are unworthy of the sacrifice I was about to make; the heart that could cherish such base thoughts could never hold mercy for the penitent. I passed him my word that I would tell you all this evening, could he but find you and send you home to me. I have made the attempt, and you have met me with insult and violence. Sir, when you are ready to listen calmly to a recital which it will cost me the bitterest agony to make, you will find me in my own room."

She looked a moment at him after she had finished speaking in bitter agony and grief, then with a slight wave of the hand she passed through the noiseless folding-doors and left him alone.

It might be four hours afterward that Paul Stanley entered his wife's room. He was flushed, his gait was unsteady, and he bungled badly in turning up the gas, so that one of the slender crystal flasks upon the dressing-table was sent crashing to the floor, and the noise supplemented by a husky growl of impatience.

In truth the poet, having retired to nurse his wrath in his sanctum, had found it necessary to quench the furious flame with so many glasses of champagne—"Bouzey exquis"—for Stanley was extravagant in his wines as in everything else—that, unawares, a mood that was not quite inspiration, had stolen upon him, and having lost sight of the late scene with his wife, he was stumbling up-stairs to bed with only one distinct idea—that of repairing thither without awakening her.

She had been lying on the bed, but not undressed, and she sprang to a sitting posture with a perfect scream of terror; then, seeing who the intruder was, she wrung her shaking hands together, moaning and sobbing hysterically.

He stared at her stupidly, saying nothing, and presently she turned to him with an imploring cry:

"I cannot do it to-night," she said, hoarsely; "my nerves are all unstrung; if I try to speak I shall only go into hysterics. Wait till to-morrow—till to-morrow," she wailed, sinking back on her pillow, while a convulsive shuddering ran from head to foot.

He approached the bedside and stood looking down at her with the same dull, stupid air, evidently but half-comprehending her sufferings, and quite forgetting their cause.

"What's the matter, Rosa? Sick, eh?" stammered he, thickly.

"I am going to have a dreadful night," said she, in a faint voice; "please give me a spoonful of that

medicine in the bottle on my dressing-table—it is marked Bromide of Potassium."

He went obediently to the dressing-table and fumbled about among the bottles, then holding one up against the light, said:

"This one?"

She glanced at it, a milk-white fluid was in it, and she answered

"Yes—the label is on it."

He was already on his way to the dressing-room when he found a glass, into which, forgetting the teaspoon, he poured a quantity of the contents of the bottle, to which adding a little water, he brought it to her, and she, raising herself on her elbow, swallowed it eagerly and sunk back, murmuring:

"Now I think I shall soon calm down and go to sleep."

He flung himself heavily into a deep arm-chair beside the glowing grate, and in a few minutes was sleeping dreamlessly.

The minutes went on; the beautiful figure, swathed in its long black robes which lay upon the snowy couch, shifted incessantly, twining the slender hands, and turning the restless head from side to side, with smothered sighs of weariness.

Gradually these motions increased in violence; the white hands were wrung convulsively; the head moved with a terrible regularity and rapidity; the whole frame twitched and started and tossed about, while a deathly moisture oozed from the sunken face, and the pearly teeth were buried in the livid under-lip.

At last an awful cry rung through the room, waking the wine-drugged poet and jarring all the glittering flasks and vases on the shining dressing-table and gleaming mantlepiece.

Rosa was holding on with both hands to the edge of the dressing-table, her lovely face frightfully conorted, her glittering eyes fixed wildly upon the bottle from which her husband had poured the draught for her to drink.

"Paul!" she shrieked, "you have poisoned me! You have given Coila's 'Oriental Cosmetique' to drink; and it is *half arsenic*."

In a moment he was at her side, fully in his senses now, sober enough, I'll warrant, by this vision of his dying wife pointing out the means by which he had murdered her.

"Nonsense! Nonsense!" he cried, snatching up the bottle and glaring at its diminished contents.

"Oh, yes, it is too true!" returned she, in a hollow voice. "It was quite full when she placed it on my table this evening. She only brought it in for me to see it, and she told me—she told me it was half arsenic. Oh, Paul!" wailed his wife, fixing her eyes, already half-veiled in death's darkness, full upon his, in sorrowful anguish. "Oh, Paul! you did not *intend* this, did you?"

He looked at her a moment horror-stricken, then lifted his right hand toward heaven, saying, with awful solemnity:

"God is my witness that this deed was nothing but a mistake."

Tears welled to her fading eyes; she crept to him and laid her pallid face against his shoulder with a little glad cry.

"I believe you, I believe you, Paul!" muttered she, while he strained the poor tortured frame to his breast, frantically looking about for help. "You could not do this to poor Rosa, even though you had ceased to love her long ago. Lay me down, dear, and if anything can be done to save me, oh, make haste!"

Nerved with superhuman strength, he carried her to the bed, and pressing a few wild kisses upon her death-struck face, he rung the bell violently until Mrs. Stanley's maid rushed in affrighted and but half-dressed.

"Attend to your mistress. I'm going for the doctor; she's desperately ill," shouted he, hoarsely, as he flew past her down-stairs into the spacious hall, where the porter yet sat in his chair sleepily awaiting the return of mademoiselle from the ball.

"Fly for Dr. Herbert!" exclaimed Stanley, not heeding the domestic's astonished exclamation at his ghastly appearance as he stood under the hall lamp with clenched hands and bloodshot eyes. "Mrs. Stanley is poisoned with arsenic. I have gone for Dr. Talbot."

As he spoke he darted to the heavy portal—withdrew the bolts, and rushed into the winter night, bare-headed.

Adams staggered after him, gaping in stupefaction.

At that instant a carriage rolled up to the curb; the footman sprang to the ground to open the door; out flitted a tiny sprite, shawled and hooded in scarlet, upon whose wide, sweet, wondering eyes the carriage-lamp shone, as she gazed, awe-smitten, upon Paul Stanley, who stood irresolute, looking upon the carriage.

"What is it that it is, monsieur?" she cried, shrilly, clasping her fairy hands. "Is it that some one is ill? Madame! No, no! Not possible!"

As she spoke, another of the men-servants appeared, hurrying down the steps, and observing the carriage standing there, but not his master, exclaimed urgently to the coachman:

"Hardy, Mrs. Stanley is dying; she wants Mr. George Laurie to be brought from Mr. Verne's immediately. Better turn round and gallop back there, right away."

Paul Stanley stepped into the light.

He was so quiet and self-possessed that all his servants stared anew, while mademoiselle's little hands flew heavenward, and she ejaculated:

"Oh, *misere!* A monster!"

"I want the carriage, Hardy," said he, taking his seat in it and quietly sending one of the men back for his hat which he had forgotten. "The doctor's presence just now is of more consequence than even that of Mr. George Laurie."

CHAPTER III.

ALAS! ALAS!

MADemoiselle DE VOUSE entered the house.

As she stood for a moment on the landing outside Mrs. Stanley's room divesting herself with trembling hands of her wraps, and listening with loudly-beating heart to the confused sounds within, she heard the housekeeper and one of the chambermaids who stood on the landing stairs whispering together of a matter which was certainly no concern of theirs.

Some short time previously an uncle of Mrs. Stanley's had left her a splendid legacy of half a million of dollars upon condition that her husband—whose neglect of her he furiously resented—should never be allowed to touch a cent of it.

This bequest was, of course, only an added mill-stone round the poor lady's neck, and as yet she had had no heart either to enjoy her wealth herself or to make arrangements for disposing of it in charities, as some of the wiser of her friends advised her to do.

"If any thing should happen to her, an' no will made," the housekeeper was whispering, "the money will go to him after all."

Mademoiselle made a hurried gesture with her hands which startled the whisperers.

Her pretty little face, usually, so pale and meek, was crimson now, and her eyes were flashing fire.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she whispered. "What beasts these English are; they talk of her money while madame dies!"

She opened the door and flitted into Mrs. Stanley's room, a lovely white-robed sylph with the blood-red flowers still in her bosom—no brighter than her blood-red lips, and the crimson girdle still around her dainty waist like a vision of Ukraine of old—the white virgin who flitted through the shadowy land at night, marking to destruction those whom the gods had doomed.

Two or three of the female servants fell back from the bed at her approach, when she bent over

awfully changed figure of her friend and gazed long and earnestly into the death-struck face.

"Alas! Alas! It is too true; she is dying!" faltered the little *Parisienne*, sinking on her knees beside the bed and giving way to a storm of sobs. "Ah, what is to become of poor Coila now? Madame, dear madame, can nothing be done?" she implored, clasping the flaccid hand which hung lifelessly over the bedside.

Mrs. Stanley slowly turned her ghastly face toward her and gazed at her strangely.

"Nothing can be done," she said, in almost inarticulate accents, and a gleam flickered in her eyes and round her pinched lips, as if she would have smiled in triumph. "I am beyond the reach of friend or enemy now, and your part here is played out—"

"*Sainte Vierge!* she raves!" cried mademoiselle, whitening, and looking round hurriedly as if to call for aid.

"Compose yourself, Coila," resumed the lady, with difficulty; "I have no time for reproaches, no time for any thing but explanation."

"You—your mind wanders!" faltered mademoiselle, her terror increasing at every word. "Are you in very great pain?"

No need for the unhappy lady to answer her in words, for here another frightful spasm seized her and twisted her tortured frame into every attitude which could express physical suffering.

Meanwhile mademoiselle's tears flowed like rain, and burying her lovely little hands in her rich black hair, she implored the bystanders in frenzied accents to alleviate those intolerable pangs which were killing her adored madame.

At last Mrs. Stanley motioned her to come close and she flew to her side, murmuring a shower of sweetest endearments.

"Is George Laurie here?" faltered Mrs. Stanley, striving with her strained and blood-shot eyes to distinguish the occupants of the room.

"Monsieur Laurie has not yet arrived," answered mademoiselle. "Ah, what would you with him? Tell me, I shall bear the message faithfully—faithfully."

"He is not here!" groaned Mrs. Stanley. "Well, perhaps it is for the best—Paul, where are you? I will try to tell you all myself; George will add what I am unable to say—"

These words she addressed to Coila, deliriously pressing her hands, then suddenly recognizing her with a wailing cry, added—where is my husband? Is there no one to receive my latest breath but you?"

"No one," wept Coila, covering her hand with kisses.

Mrs. Stanley lay in silence until another spasm seized and tore her as before, and leaving her almost dead. She made haste to utter her last wishes.

And thus it came to pass that her last wishes were received in the ear of the little *Parisienne*.

"George Laurie knows what my resolution was, last night," said she, and it was with difficulty that mademoiselle, though listening with all her might, could understand the almost unintelligible words; "tell him I was too weak to carry it out. Tell him that I solemnly implore him to acquaint my husband with that of my past history which I have hitherto withheld from him. Tell him that there are two packets in my desk, and the one which is tied with black ribbon is to be given my husband to read, by George Laurie, while he tells my story, and then to be buried with me in my coffin. The other packet is my will, and I call you all to witness"—she had raised her voice a little and, supposing herself heard by all in the room, proceeded solemnly—"I call you all to witness that the will which I have made bequeathing my property to a certain person, embodies my real wishes and that I die desiring it to be carried out."

"What does she say? Is she speaking to us?" cried two or three, pressing forward.

Mademoiselle turned round, earnestly waving them back.

"I cannot tell what she says. Retire—retire, I pray you!" said she, looking very white and scared; "I think she whispers of family matters which none should overhear but monsieur, her husband."

In the deep silence which followed, Mrs. Stanley averted her face and, folding her hand on her breast, moved her lips voicelessly as if she prayed.

Suddenly the door opened, and Paul Stanley hurried in, accompanied by the doctor. The latter at once proceeded to examine his patient, while mademoiselle, for the first time in her life, ventured to clasp Mr. Stanley's hand and draw him aside.

"Dear monsieur, how did it happen? Tell me all—I am so frightened," she faltered.

"Laurie has not come, then?" observed Mr. Stanley, in a hard voice, not heeding the inquiry, and he coldly turned toward the bed.

She made another effort, and overcame her shrinking timidity enough to detain him yet longer.

"The servants are saying such strange things," said she, piteously—as indeed they had been—matters between their master and mistress giving them ripe cause for comment now; "they are saying that she drank poison from the hand of monsieur—I beg ten thousand pardons, monsieur, but, oh! tell me how to silence them."

The poet was quite master of himself now, and saw the inevitable necessity of taking a safe stand once and for all.

He spent a few minutes in detailing to Mademoiselle De Vouse exactly how the mistake had occurred, and by that time the doctor's examination was over, and his wife was speechless.

"I am too late; I can do nothing for her," said Dr. Talbot, stepping back to give place to the husband—"Her last moments are approaching."

As Stanley bent over his wife, mademoiselle looking on with painful interest, she made a few feeble efforts to whisper something, but in vain, and great tears gushed from her eyes.

"Rosa," said Paul, faintly, the tragedy of the situation overwhelming him once more, "have you nothing to say to me—nothing?"

She gathered all her poor strength with one last effort, and, rising suddenly, flung herself into his arms, and in the act expired.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DEAD WIFE'S TRUST.

COILA DE VOUSE stood at last in her own room, slowly divesting herself of her ball-dress.

The dawn was struggling in through the Venetian blinds, paling the rays of the tapers in the gilded candelabra on either side of the tall Psyche before which she stood with her unfastened dress huddled around her, her white arms crossed like a nun's upon her bosom, which gently rose and fell; gazing at the reflection of her two large, dark, pulsating eyes.

"This terrible secret," murmured she, as if she addressed the soul which looked back at her out of the depths of the mirror—"shall I disclose it, or shall I hold it sacred? I have the cue—shall I give it and let the tragedy proceed, or shall I be dumb and let the play break down in harmless confusion? To deliver madame's last message to Monsieur George Laurie would be to give the cue—beware, Coila! This secret which madame wishes disclosed may blemish her reputation with her husband—with the world; may turn Monsieur Stanley's already lukewarm feelings toward Monsieur Laurie into furious hate. Beware! beware, Coila! To be dumb, is to lock the whole mystery up in the breasts of Monsieur George Laurie and myself, where it can do no harm to madame's memory, nor to Monsieur George, nor to anybody but poor me, should it be discovered that I have withheld madame's last wishes."

She stopped in her reflections to take off her dress, and to lay it, like a shimmering ghost of her

pretty little self, on the sofa. Then she went back to the mirror, looking very small and slight and childlike, and, taking a silver-backed comb, began to thrud out her long ebony tresses, while she looked at herself with an air of innocent seriousness.

"I wish I knew which course to take," she sighed, still *sotto voce*, watching her crimson lips with some interest as they formed the words. "What would be most noble, most devout? Ah! I am such a foolish child that I can never reason logically. No! I will put it to the test of chance. Chance shall decide for me. But, what shall be the test? Ah, I know!"

With her head bewitchingly poised on one side, she severed a little tress from the rest, and approached with it close to the light.

"If I find one little gray hair here—and, oh! have I not known sorrow enough to bleach my hair!—that little gray hair shall say to me, 'Bear to Monsieur George madame's last wishes!' and, miserable me! I shall obey."

She carefully parted the jetty lock, hair by hair, and when the last fell from her slender fingers, she uttered a low, gurgling cry of relief, and clapped her hands noiselessly.

"Destiny says 'be dumb,' and dumb I shall be," said she, giving herself a parting glance ere she fluttered away from the mirror.

She locked her chamber door, and drew the curtains closely across the windows, then she approached on tiptoe a tiny, gilded table, upon which stood an amber, inlaid desk.

"Madame's wishes must be fulfilled," said mademoiselle, demurely, unlocking the desk with a key which she took from a tiny drawer in the side of the desk. "The packet shall be buried with her, but unread—Monsieur Paul Stanley, unread."

Next morning the pretty Frenchwoman was taken, "quite desolated," from the house of affliction to the shelter of Mr. Verne's roof, where Maiblume, her lovely eyes all swollen with grief, welcomed her with streaming tears and hands outstretched in sympathy and welcome. Coila fluttered to her bosom and twined around her neck, faltering, amid a storm of sobs:

"I have lost my friend—my only friend—and the world seems wide and cold to poor Coila. May she rest a little while on this sweet breast until her courage comes back, and she can face her cruel destiny like a true daughter of the De Vouse?"

"Poor child!" murmured Maiblume, who, at nineteen, possessed such a majesty of womanhood that she seemed at the moment like an exquisite mother brooding over this tremulous little one; and turning, she cast a glance of the sweetest entreaty upon her father, who stood near, watching the meeting, not unmoved.

The pure light of the winter noonday shone broadly in upon that sumptuous room, with its long reaches of softly-tinted distance, its statuettes of purest Carrara, its rare paintings in gleaming gilded frames, its jardiniers of priceless porcelain, overflowing with richly-odored flowers—shone coldly on the three figures grouped in a remote corner, tears and sighs alone audible to break the deep hush. Was this the scene of last night's brilliant assembly—of the soft crush and flutter of priceless silk and lace—of the ever-blending and intermingling of the brightest, the gayest, the loveliest beings who graced the great city? Only low sighs for the ripple of laughter and the proud swell of music; falling tears instead of flashing diamonds; loneliness and stillness for the gay and brilliant dance!

"Great heavens, how sudden death is!" exclaimed Mr. Verne, involuntarily, and stepping forward he took the young girl from Maiblume's arms, and supporting her tenderly to a sofa, seated himself at her side.

"Mrs. Stanley was, you say, your only friend," observed he, gently. "Now let me understand your circumstances fully, as I wish to act a friend's part toward you. I have often heard you say that you are an orphan, and that your were brought up in a con-

vent school. Have you any relatives in France, mademoiselle?"

"Oh, yes," wept mademoiselle, clasping her hands and shuddering. "I have a terrible old aunt, an abbess, who desires me to take the veil, and oh! I am so afraid of her! For you must know, dear friend"—here she lifted her dove-like eyes, swimming in tears, to his face—"I have no vocation for religion, and I dare not enter the church with such a gay, wicked little heart as mine, always filled with mirth and pleasure."

"No! no! you sha'n't take the veil," exclaimed Mr. Verne, fervently. "Proceed, my dear."

"Then I have a horde of fearful cousins," wept mademoiselle, wringing her hands afresh. "Oh! such dashing cavaliers and court-bred dames! who all throw scorn upon poor little me because my mamma was what you call poetess and received money for her efforts; I can't go to them; I would die first!"

"No, no, poor girl, you shall not go to them," cried Mr. Verne, still more ardently. "But your guardian—have you no guardian?"

"No, monsieur," said mademoiselle, sadly. "My guardian, papa's friend, died two years ago, leaving me in the care of the Sisters of the Convent of the Holy Cross, St. Omer. There Madame Stanley chanced to see me during her visit to France, the year before last, and was so kind as to love me and ask me to come to the beautiful America and live with her, whenever I was old enough to enter into society. I have money, monsieur; yes, plenty of money, but I have no one to love me, and to give me a home like that which I have lost by the ever-to-be-deplored death of my blessed madame!"

Here the little lady's distress burst forth with such violence that Maiblume, kneeling by her, passed her lovely arms around her and drew her to her shoulder, mingling her tears with hers.

"Father, father!" cried she, looking up with the same sweet entreaty.

"Yes, my darling," said the author, taking one of Coila's tiny hands between his own, and patting it with deep affection. "Now, little girl," said he to Coila, "wipe these tears away and listen to me. Would you like to come and live here, to be Maiblume's sister and my dear charge?"

"Oh, say yes, dear mademoiselle!" cried Maiblume, with a burst of generous sympathy. "We shall both love you so dearly, and cherish you so tenderly that you will never regret having given yourself up to us."

At Mr. Verne's proposition mademoiselle had uttered a faint cry, and had sprung to her feet light as a thistle-down. She now stood with clasped hands and dilated eyes, looking from the one to the other with an expression half frightened, half-rapturous, and wholly bewitching. At last her bosom began to heave, a wave of feeling swept over her innocent little blossom of a face, and, while large tears gushed from her passion-darkened eyes, she cried, in the faintest, most musical, and tremulous voice imaginable:

"Oh, Blessed Mother, dost thou see, dost thou hear?" She sunk to her knees before the father and daughter, addressing them thus: "Friends, I cannot thank you; this cold language of yours has no words passionate enough. Friends, I can only live for you, calling down upon your dear heads every hour of every day the blessing of the orphan, of the stranger, of the heart-broken and helpless."

Here, with a burst of emotion, she rose and threw herself into their arms.

George Laurie, Mr. Verne's secretary, sat at his desk in his employer's study, busily copying manuscript, while the scene just described was going on in the drawing-room. Sometimes he laid down his pen, and leaning his head upon his hand, would fall into profound and serious reverie, which he would anon shake off, and start up to pace the room with hurried steps, his brows knitted and his eyes fixed on vacancy.

"Did she confess last night?" muttered he, at length, "or did her courage fail her once more? Good Heavens, what a shocking occurrence! Poisoned! and by his own hand! Oh, is it possible that she made her confession, and that this is the result of it?" He came to a dead halt, looking out upon the frozen street and the streams of passengers muffled in furs and velvets, with unseeing eyes, then clenched his hands and stamped impatiently. "What a young idiot I am!" he exclaimed. "Who but an idiot would weave this tragedy out of a tissue of circumstances such as these? No! The idea is preposterous! And her own servants say that she assured them as long as she had strength, that her husband gave her the poison by mistake. Well, I shall know all in time. When the will is read we shall see whether Mr. Stanley was in possession of its contents beforehand or not."

He went back to his desk with a resolute air, and applied himself to his work again, but soon threw it aside to run his fingers restlessly through his hair, and to resume his reflections.

"What an unfortunate thing that I should be mixed up in all this! For all the assistance I have been to her I might as well have been left out of the scrape. Still, if she has only told the truth, at last, and if no guilt has come of it, I ought not selfishly to reject the part which was thrown upon me to play. And the poor lady did seem sometimes to take comfort from the thought that I knew the worst, and encouraged her to do right. Well, well; I shall soon know all, and so, alas! I fear, will the scolding and flouting world! Poor Rosa Stanley! I pity you dead more than I ever pitied you alive, for you go to the grave with the stain of shame fresh upon your name, whereas you might have lived it down, and been the happier and the better for it!"

He took up his pen with a heavy sigh, nor laid it down again until Mr. Verne entered, when the day's work went on as usual.

George lived in the house, and was held in high esteem alike by the author and his lovely daughter, both for the sterling faith and honor of his character, and its guileless transparency. Indeed, no one who knew George Laurie, and himself possessed an honorable and upright nature, could long withhold from him esteem and affection; while his frank, boyish good-spirits, and graceful, gentlemanly manner, recommended him to the favor of the ladies.

And yet George Laurie was no stately hero of romance, conqueror of fortune and of hearts, but only a single-hearted gentleman, intent on making his way in the world through the straight and narrow path of unsullied integrity.

The night preceding the day appointed for Mrs. Stanley's funeral was spent by the devout little Frenchwoman on her knees, in prayer, beside the corpse of her idolized madame. No persuasions of Maiblume's could induce her to forego this melancholy vigil, nor would she permit a solitary attendant to bear her company. Indeed, they were all so accustomed to the clinging and timid manners of the convent-bred girl, that she astonished everybody by her devotion and fortitude on this occasion.

Behold her, then, in the pure white dress which was her almost invariable attire, kneeling in that black-draped chamber beside the casket which held the remains of the once brilliant and beautiful Rosa Stanley. Flowers everywhere, wreathing the shrouded mirrors, garlanding the empty bed, heaped in heavy profusion upon the still form in the narrow, glistening couch in which it was to sleep forever. But no flower among them all, with sheepest petals of transparent snow, could vie with Coila in her drooping grace and purity.

Often they passed by the half-open door softly that they might not disturb her, and looking in, they always saw her kneeling there, motionless, her hands crossed upon her bosom, her death-white face upturned toward heaven, and her long, black hair—a sable shroud—half infolding her slight, shimmering

figure, while the tapers shed their soft luster upon the still scene, and not a breath was heard.

But no one was in corridor or neighboring saloon, when, at last, the tiny figure rose, softly, noiselessly as a wraith from shadowy stream, and gliding to the door, listened, finger on lip and dark eyes growing wild and wide. No one saw the lonely watcher flitting back as silently as a ray of light to the coffin; bending over the dead face in its fixed and stony pallor; slipping her small hands along the silver-studded edge, while her own face whitened to a ghastly likeness of that of the dead; slipping her small hands down the satin, and starting and uttering an involuntary cry when they came in contact with the rigid shoulders and marble arms within, running her trembling fingers along the edge of the lining in the bottom of the coffin, pausing with one hand on a place almost under the pillow, then, snatching a tiny case from her pocket, flashing out a pair of scissors, looking round toward the door with blanched face, black eyes and bated breath; then back to the coffin, ripping the lining where it met between the bottom and the side, holding the scissors in her clenched teeth while she drew from her bosom a small square packet, passing it through the slit and along the bottom of the coffin until it lay right under the dead lady's head; folding in the ragged edges of the slit, arranging the delicate lace of the pillow, over the place, scattering a few white flowers over all, and stepping back with a low, shuddering hiss!

The scissors returned to the case, the case to her pocket; no one saw the gentle child throw up her clasped hands, nor heard her cry out in a burst of ungovernable emotion:

"Grand Dieu! I have done it for the best—I have saved my friend!"

CHAPTER V.

A MAN'S HATE.

THE burial of Mrs. Stanley was over now; she was lying quiet in the cold mausoleum at Greenwood, with the sun or the snow drifting in through the gilded bars, a cold house for a heart that had always beat warmly to every kind and tender emotion until now!

The house she had left had got back its old looks, now that her cold presence was out of it; the crape was off the door-handle, the blinds were drawn up, the footsteps of the inmates were no longer hushed, nor their voices subdued.

Her interment had been a magnificent pageant; long and glittering was the line of carriages which had followed her to her tomb; distinguished had been the assembly, and many a notable name was inscribed in the roll of mourners, for Paul Stanley was a celebrated man, and his wife had been a fashionable beauty. Some humbler mourners, too, fringed the outside of the illustrious throng, stretching their gaunt necks and straining their hollow eyes to get a glimpse of the velvet-draped casket which contained her who had, many a time, spoken sweet words to them, and done kind acts for them, which were inscribed on their forlorn hearts in letters never fading.

The bereaved husband performed his part in the ceremonial with great grace and propriety; he was noticeably pale; sunk in profound grief, and never once lifted his eyes or seemed to be aware of the presence of any one around him.

"Perfectly stunned, poor fellow!" said his friends, as they sauntered back to their usual avocations. "It must be a frightful thing for a man of his exquisite sensibilities to realize that he actually was the cause of her death. Heaven have mercy on us! I shouldn't wonder if he should turn melancholy mad!"

The object of their compassion returned from the funeral of his wife, and threw himself in his easy-chair beside his study fire. The color had not returned to his tawny cheek, and from time to time he

shivered involuntarily and looked uneasily around him, as if he felt some evil presence in the room.

"Well, well; she's gone," at last said he, rising and taking a cigar from its case, "and an eternity of regrets will never bring her back. I believe she loved me to the end, too," he said, half groaning. "Oh, Rosa! Rosa! Rosa!"

He flung down the cigar, and going to a little ebony and silver cabinet, brought forth a decanter of brandy, and was about to mix himself a tumbler of it, when a grisly thought assailed him, and he set it down hastily, and turned away with his hand to his eyes, faltering:

"If I hadn't been too fond of this and the like of this, I would never have committed that fatal blunder. I've half a mind to think this out seriously." He sat down with his head between his hands, and so remained, moody and motionless, until a servant, opening the door, ushered in a gentleman, announcing him as Mr. Falcon, solicitor.

Stanley started as his eye fell on the stranger—a smooth, pale, obsequious little man, with a bland but wrinkled smile, and an ever-ready bow; but he recovered himself instantly, and rose with a civil though distant salutation.

"Take a chair, Mr. Falcon," said he, waving him into one opposite his own; "you will find me anything but good company, I fear."

"I should not have intruded, sir," said Mr. Falcon, with a bow, while the piercing gray eyes fixed themselves upon the face of his host like burning-glasses, "but I have business to perform—business connected with your late wife's property."

Stanley returned his look steadily, but made no reply beyond a slight inclination.

"Six weeks ago," continued Mr. Falcon, "I had the honor of drawing up the late Mrs. Stanley's will." He paused, with the usual smile and bow, while Stanley gazed at him with hardening eye, and the dark blood mounting to his forehead.

"This is all new to me, Mr. Falcon," said he, grimly. "You certainly astonish me."

Mr. Falcon made no reply to that, save customary obeisance, but went on in a professionally subdued tone:

"Mrs. Stanley, on that occasion, did me the honor of showing me where she intended to keep her will, and of requesting me to seal the said receptacle immediately upon my knowledge of her decease—sudden or otherwise—which order I took, the liberty of obeying, the morning subsequent to that event."

Stanley rose in great agitation and paced about the room, striving in vain to conceal his perturbation.

"A will! Bless my soul, what does all this mean?" he cried, in a burst of mortification. "To whom, or what, may I ask, did she will her property?"

"With Mr. Stanley's permission," said Mr. Falcon, with a series of deferential little smiles, and propitiatory little bows, "I shall now summon the household, bring the document, and, in their presence, inform you. There is one person who has a right to be present—whom I have taken the liberty of bringing along with me—Mr. George Laurie by name."

Stanley turned upon him as if he had struck him a blow, and frowning blackly, ejaculated:

"George Laurie! what in the name of wonder has he to do with this matter?"

"With your permission, again," smiled Mr. Falcon, bowing himself to the door, "I shall now introduce him; he is waiting just at hand, and the will shall explain all."

He opened the door, no wider than was necessary, however, and slipped out, closing it noiselessly behind him. In a very few moments he returned, bearing in his hands Mrs. Stanley's writing-desk—a pretty little thing of ebony, inlaid with amber—and with a most reverential air, laid it upon the poet's writing-table. He then stood aside, and revealed behind him, George Laurie, looking very frigid and resolute.

With the slightest possible salutation, Stanley did

the *devoirs* to his guest by waving him to a distant chair, and continued himself to pace about the room, with the scowl ever darkening on his brow, until several of the servants filed in, in answer to Mr. Falcon's summons, he reading out the names of those whose presence was desired, from a slip of paper which he held in his hand.

"Now, if you please," said he, when all were seated, and drawing the desk toward him, he expeditiously removed one seal from the little drawer which contained the key, and another seal from the lock; then, inserting the key, looked round with a cunning twinkle in his eye.

Stanley stood at his elbow, looking on with devouring interest.

"Mr. Laurie," said Mr. Falcon, in his smoothest, most deferential tone, "be good enough to draw your chair close to the table; there are portions of this document which it is unnecessary for any one to hear except Mr. Stanley and yourself."

A visible tremor ran through Stanley from head to foot; he bit his lip fiercely, but he took no heed of the young man, as he slowly and reluctantly obeyed the lawyer's invitation and sat down close to the little desk.

Mr. Falcon turned the key, opened the desk, removed from it the loose papers, and finding the spring of a secret drawer, pulled it out.

All three, looking in at once, uttered a simultaneous exclamation.

The secret drawer was empty!

A flash of triumph broke from Stanley's eyes; utter astonishment sat on George's face; but the lawyer turned scarlet with mortification—then, white with wrath.

"Foul play!" cried he, in a voice that rung through the room, and startled everybody to their feet like the report of a pistol. "Foul play, I say! The will is stolen!"

Stanley turned upon him with a look which might have scorched him up.

"Sir, you exceed your office," said he.

That cool, crushing tone of superiority brought Mr. Falcon's wits back to him. In a moment he was his own man again executing his most deprecating bow and smile.

"My dear sir, you are right," said he; "let us stick to business. The will was here; it must be here still; we may find it among these papers."

In a twinkling he had turned them all over and examined the desk inside and outside, and was turning his piercing eyes from face to face, ending at last with George Laurie. He looked at him full two minutes without winking, and Stanley, observing his intense scrutiny, fastened his burning eyes also upon him.

George returned Mr. Falcon's gaze steadily, but by his changing and hardening expression, it was plain that he did not feel at ease under it.

Having satisfied himself on this point, Mr. Falcon suddenly dismissed the servants, and, following the last of them to the door, watched them out of sight, closed it carefully, and returned to the gentlemen who stood together, but not looking at each other, at the desk.

"Mr. Laurie," said the lawyer, "you know something of this matter; it is useless to conceal it, and if I may be allowed to advise, your most prudent course is candor."

"Gentlemen," said George, looking at them both with unflinching eyes, "I do know something about this will, but not of its disappearance."

"What do you know?" demanded Mr. Falcon.

"I knew that Mrs. Stanley intended to make her will, and then I knew that she had made it."

"You knew!" ejaculated Stanley, under his breath. The same ungovernable thrill seemed to run through him as he spoke, and, for the moment, he seemed almost demoniac as he stood there, trying to smother his fury.

"Are you aware of the contents of that will?" inquired Mr. Falcon, taking constant heed of both, but

preserving his calmest, most insinuating manner.

George turned away hastily, saying, in a low voice:

"Be kind enough to excuse me answering that question. I can't answer it."

"Why can't you answer it, sir?" demanded Stanley, in a voice almost as low, but so fraught with fury and menace that the lawyer turned more heedfully toward him.

"It is nothing to the purpose whether I know or do not know the contents of the will," said George, turning to him a pale and anxious face. "It was the result of a mere accident that Mrs. Stanley ever mentioned to me that she intended to make her will, and, if you please, I would rather not pursue the subject further, at least until you have answered me one question. Did Mrs. Stanley make any especial statement to you on the night of her death?"

Stanley whitened to the lips.

"I know," answered he, still in that low, vibrating voice of chained-up fury, "I know that she and you had agreed between you that some statement was to be made to me."

He paused, malignantly waiting for George to offer some assent or dissent to this; but George moved not a muscle.

"I know this," reiterated Stanley, with a little bitter laugh, "because she told me so."

"Did she make the statement?" inquired George, with intense excitement.

"She did not," replied Stanley, between his teeth; "she left it, I presume, for you to make."

George again turned hastily aside, almost overcome by the revulsion of feeling. This man, wicked of heart and wild of life, must be innocent, then, of the dastardly crime he had laid to his charge! Mrs. Stanley had died with her secret locked in her own bosom, and her death had been caused by a mistake.

The icy tones of Stanley recalled him to himself.

"If Mr. Falcon will step into the next room for a few minutes, perhaps my young friend may be induced to give me his confidence."

"He need not go," said George, firmly; "I have nothing to say—no confidence to give, because I never had anything to do with Mrs. Stanley's affairs; at least, I became aware of some of them accidentally; but she never empowered me to act for her in any way. This is all I can or will say on this subject, Mr. Stanley."

"You absolutely refuse to impart to me the knowledge you have of my late wife's affairs?" said Mr. Stanley, almost in a whisper.

"I am obliged absolutely to refuse," returned George.

"Very good, sir!" said Paul Stanley, stepping back with clenched hands, while a blaze of frantic hatred lit his eyes; "you've said all that is necessary. I understand our relative positions. Henceforward, if you are not as rash as you are impertinent, you will keep out of my way!"

George started as if stung, and cresting his handsome head, gazed at his adversary in burning anger.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" said the soft, smooth voice of Mr. Falcon, as he stepped between them with a little bow and smile, "this is all nonsense; let us go back to business. Mr. Stanley will you be good enough to assist me in a thorough search through the late Mrs. Stanley's effects for the missing documents!"

While he was speaking, George, with a slight bow, left the room, and a few minutes after the house, crossing its threshold for the last time.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FACE AT THE CRAG.

Six months have passed—the scene is changed.

We now bid you look upon a glittering sea-bight in one of the Northern States, where the hoary-headed Atlantic billows march in upon the golden

sand in endless phalanxes; where a black reef runs out half across the bay, sending high the curdled foam in rainbow spray, where a snow-white hamlet nestles in a green rent between two flower-flushed mountains, and all along the sandy shore rugged cliffs are piled mass on mass, and perforated with innumerable tiny caves, into and out of which the sea-birds flutter, chattering.

Stormcliff!

Fitting name, indeed, when the storm-cloud darkens the summer sky; when lightnings play across the polished sea, and around these jagged rocks; when the foam-flecked breakers rush across the level floor, dashing far up the adamant wall; and the hamlet is hidden by the driving scud; but when the sea lies calm and smiling in the radiant sunlight, when the long sand reach is strewn with shining shells and floating banners of bronze bright dulse, and the little azure pools at the foot of the cliff are alive with darting minnows, and gemmed with opal-tinted sunfish; when the scent of roses comes down from the rose-crowned crag, and the bells of the sheep in yonder velvet-green valley tinkle softly to the muffled roar of the slumbering ocean, you would laugh at the boding name for such a halcyon spot.

They are all here—Mr. Verne, Maiblume, Made-moiselle, George and Mr. Stanley. They have retired from the vortex of fashion to this quietest of nooks, and have here lived for months, secluded.

The author is a hard student, and works best in solitary places; the poet also loves loneliness and the sea, and finds his late affliction cheered by the presence of his friend Verne; thus they come to be here, which is the reason for all the rest being here, too.

Maiblume never will leave her father for the gayer summer resorts; Coila is her sister and goes where she goes; and George Laurie is as indispensable an adjunct as the author's head—for he is his hand.

The Vernes have taken a little cottage standing by itself apart from all other cottages; nestling under the shadow of a vine-clad hill and half-hidden by the waving foliage of shrub and tree and tangled creeper which lovingly crowd round it. A baby brook runs babbling out of the shrubbery hard by and winds in and out, through all the cottage grounds, like a blessing through a beautiful life, gladdening the heart at every turn with its freshening influence.

By its velvet banks would Maiblume and Coila wander half the summer day, reading or sketching till, in the cool of the evening, the gentlemen would join them, when they would all repair to the sea beach.

Stanley boards in the hamlet but spends almost all his leisure time with his friends.

His wife's will never having been discovered, he had in due time been put in possession of her property.

It was a delicious August afternoon, about five o'clock. The two young ladies were waiting at a rustic gate for the approach of the gentlemen, always considered due at that hour.

Maiblume, in her robes of tender green, clasped about the dainty waist with silver, looked like some stately maid of olden time, awaiting in greenwood glade her steel-clad knight to come through the wavering leaves and shadows to kneel in homage at her feet; while Coila, in her filmy clouds of white, with her black hair raining down, and a long, green fern-leaf in her tiny hand, looked like a fairy changeling, listening for the elfin horn to recall her to that brighter land.

"They are coming," said Coila, as a cheery whistle echoed through the leafy wood, and she lightly sprang to the top of a moss-grown urn to see further along the winding pathway. "Here come Monsieur the papa and Monsieur the poet, arm in arm; these two, how they agree together. My heart! neither of them should ever have married."

Maiblume laughed indifferently.

"I am glad to see Mr. Stanley getting over his

trouble at last," observed she; "he is almost like his former self again."

Coila sat down on the top of the urn with her little bronze slippers on its pedestal.

"Monsieur the poet should marry again," said she, gayly. "Ah, how I should like to be the wife of a clever man! Should you not?"

"I don't know," said Maiblume, absently, and bending over the rude gate she plucked a pink wild rose from outside, touched it with her lips and fastened it in her bosom.

"Ah! Here comes Monsieur George!" exclaimed Coila, waving her fern-leaf joyously—"dear, kind, good Monsieur George!"

Maiblume looked out to the shining sea and her eyes seemed larger and more dewy while the rose on her bosom trembled with the quick pulses of her heart.

"After all I would rather be Monsieur George's wife than Monsieur Stanley's," resumed Coila, eying the advancing gentlemen, with babyish simplicity; "Monsieur Stanley is clever, but—bah! he has not the good heart of Monsieur George. Which should you prefer, Maiblume, my dear?"

Maiblume shrugged her shoulders, saying a little coldly:

"Nonsense!"

And Coila burst into a silver rill of laughter.

"Oh, I know already!" cried she, "and so does the fern-leaf. Which does she prefer, Monsieur Stanley or Monsieur George—head or heart?" and here she began plucking the fern-stalk bare, frond by frond, while the gentlemen rapidly approached and Maiblume's cheeks flushed crimson—"head or heart—head or heart," whispered the little witch, while her eyes gleamed with mischief. "Oh *ma chere*, here it is—just as I knew—*heart!* Gentlemen, Maiblume says she prefers marrying heart to marrying head. Is she not right, dear Monsieur Verne?" and descending with a light bound from her perch she clasped that gentleman's arm with the joyous freedom of a spoiled child.

"What have you two been talking about?" said Stanley, stepping to Maiblume's side, while George turned suddenly away and seemed intent on the bark of a silver birch.

Maiblume looked round with a quiet face.

"I have not been talking at all," said she, carelessly. "Coila has been arranging my future with the magical aid of a fern-leaf—that's all."

Stanley's scrutinizing glance fell; he opened the gate, and they walked all together down the quiet, grassy lane into the ravine, with the sea-beach full in front.

And it was as strange to see the exquisite propriety of manner which was observed between Mr. Stanley and George Laurie, with the unexploded mine described in the fifth chapter still between them, as it was to see the nameless influence which Mademoiselle Coila exerted over every one of the party, but we all know that innocent simplicity is often far more artlessly artful than finished diplomacy. She moved them with a word—a word that a child might have spoken; if she had had the key to all their hearts she could not have used her powers with more clever *finesse*; yet she clung all the while to Mr. Verne with a timorous, retiring air, as if, half afraid of the younger gentleman, she felt truly happy and safe with the old, so that Mr. Verne, full of wonder and admiration, could not see an inch beyond the pretty Parisienne.

They arrived at the beach, and stood a moment—the sunset crimsoning their faces—to drink in the crisp land breeze and to revel in the mystic peace of the noble sea-scene.

Maiblume, drawing a long breath, said at length:

"Oh, that this could last forever!"

Stanley and Laurie turned simultaneously to her, each with eager attention; but she looked at neither, seemingly forgetful of all save the broad, glistening expanse with its trailing fringe of foam at their feet.

"Monsieur Papa," cried Coila, nestling up to him,

"I want somebody to repeat a poem about the sea; and somebody else to go out to the rocks over there and pluck me some dulse; and I want both my desires gratified at once. Monsieur, my dear papa, will you not direct the kind gentlemen to obey?"

"By all means, my dear child," laughed Mr. Verne. "Which do you wish to send dulse-gathering?"

"A thousand thanks!" cried Coila, with her most delicious lisp. "Monsieur George knows the rocks by heart—and so does Monsieur Stanley the poem; behold then! And Maiblume will applaud the poem while I will eat the dulse so briny, so delicate!"

With a smile at her saucy grace George started on his errand, while Mr. Stanley drew a sudden breath of relief, and, well pleased with the part assigned him, dived into the stores of his mind for some poem worthy of the theme and of his charming audience.

Just then Coila uttered a little petulant cry.

"Maiblume!"

"What, my dear Coila?"

"Monsieur George—he knows not dulse from eel-grass!"

"Ah! that's fatal. Recall him."

"But you know every fairy weed that waves from ocean rock. Maiblume, sweet life, do you accompany him!"

Cool request, was it not?

And, utterly unconscious of the poet's freezing stare, and Maiblume's gasp and burning blush, the little simpleton urged it persistently.

"Go, Maiblume," said Mr. Verne, laughing heartily; "the poem can await your return!"

"May I accompany?" almost pleaded Stanley.

Maiblume only waved her hand in stately dissent, and with a quiet step followed George down the level sands.

Anon he glanced behind, and seeing her coming hastened back to her with glad smiles.

"You are coming to help me, are you?" cried he gayly; "thanks; it is a much better arrangement than mademoiselle's."

"This, too, is mademoiselle's," observed Maiblume, her deep, sweet eyes on the ground.

Side by side over the firm, wet sand, while the gentle wavelets crept up to kiss their feet, and ran back laughing to whisper in old Ocean's ear of a tale as eternal as the song he sings; side by side, while myriads of white sand birds started up from before them and circled around them, merrily chattering their congratulations; side by side, while the wild roses leaned low from their ledge above, and the honeysuckle sent down its streamers of triumph to bless and greet them on their way, and even the grim face of the sea-washed rock seemed flushed with kindly sympathy!

Oh, she was beautiful, this Maiblume!

"Miss Maiblume, you wished that this might always last," said George, in a hushed voice. "Are you then so very happy here?"

"Very happy," answered Maiblume, softly; "very happy and at rest."

"May you always be so!" said George, with sudden fervent passion. "May no blighting shadow ever fall across your path!"

He spoke with such unexpected energy that she turned quickly, and, seeing him pale and agitated, exclaimed, hurriedly:

"George, what is the matter? What do you fear for me?"

"Don't ask me, dear Miss Maiblume," faltered he. "I have no right to speak to you on such a subject."

"You have a right," cried she. "Have we not always been like brother and sister? Have we not always been the frankest of friends toward each other? Dear George, don't let us misunderstand each other now! I value your friendship beyond words—and—your sympathy."

As she finished in a tone vibrating with a strange, sweet emotion, she gave him her velvet hand. Its

touch set all his being thrilling with a bitter-sweet pain, and as he clasped it close, his heart swelled and swelled and tears rushed into his eyes.

For oh, he loved her with that deepest and truest of loves—the first-born!

A rugged column of weed-swathed rock screened them from the eyes of those they had left behind; a tongue of rough stones ran outward from before them, into which the sea swirled its pallid froth and glistening brown wave; not a soul was in sight.

"Have I a right to disturb your peace with my ungenerous fears?" said George, trembling; "will it be any proof of the—the affection I have always had for you, to trouble and perplex you with my undefined suspicions concerning one whom you seem to hold dear?"

"Wait a moment!" exclaimed Maiblume, gazing up in his agitated face with wonder in her own; "you speak most strangely. To whom do you allude?"

"He is not worthy of you, Miss Maiblume!" burst passionately from George, while the maiden started and her sweet brow clouded warningly. "You say I have a right to speak—then I will speak! He is as far beneath you as this mass of lifeless pulp is beneath yonder pure light!" and he pointed to the tremulous evening star, while he spurned a starfish from the dry stone at his foot.

A moment's deep pause, then she lifted her great, magnetic eyes full to his.

"George," breathed the low voice, which was all music to his heart, "never mention him again. Don't fear for me; I could not love him even if he asked me, and he never has."

"Thank you! thank you!" faltered George, turning very pale, for this was not what his boiling fears had prophesied; and he pressed her two flower-soft hands within his with unconscious strength, and his pulses quickened wildly, and his kindling eyes dwelt upon hers so burningly, that little by little her rare, cold beauty warmed and glowed into rich, pulsating life; her proud eyes drooped; her sumptuous bosom rose and fell with half-gasping sighs; she sought in fluttering uncertainty to release herself—and even while she averted her telltale face, her treacherous heart melted, and she leaned more and more upon him.

Another moment and she would have melted wholly and yielded to the luring spell of the youth's first wordless declaration of love; but, like a sprite from some eerie land, a strange boy-figure came out of the shadowy crags behind them and lifted up his wan, unearthly visage with a sudden cry.

"My God!" uttered George Laurie, hoarsely, and he started from Maiblume's side as if shot.

CHAPTER VII.

TAKE CARE WHAT YOU DO!

It was a weird little figure that, as it stood in the darkening twilight between the sundered lovers!

He seemed a boy in years with his slender frame, his attenuated arms and shrunken limbs—the limbs of a child of six on the body of a half-grown lad; he supported himself on two crutches; his clothes were torn and soiled; his head and feet were bare; a most forlorn and vagabond waif he was—but his face was the fairest that ever the sun shone on, and his long hair blew like ropes of gold in the salt-sea wind!

"Oh! the beautiful—beautiful boy!" gasped Maiblume.

George bent over the cripple, hiding him completely from her.

"What do you want here?" he asked, in a hurried undertone.

Maiblume heard no answer. Having recovered from her surprise at his sudden appearance, she advanced to see him closer; the glimpse she had had of his face piqued her curiosity and touched her sense of the romantic.

George met her half-way; in the gathering gloom he looked cold and unearthly.

"Leave him alone—don't go near him; don't speak to him," said he, in a strange voice.

"Why?" cried Maiblume, struck with amazement, and mechanically she tried again to see the object of her commiseration.

George seized her by the arm and almost roughly drew her to the other side of the projecting rock.

"Maiblume, dear, dear Maiblume," said he, in a voice of tragic entreaty, "let me ask you to leave this boy to me."

Astonished questions crowded to her lips, but seeing more clearly the awful pallor of the youth as he bent toward her, she sat confounded, looking silently at him.

"I dare not have you go too near him," continued George, confusedly; "there is danger to—to— It is best for you to remain here while I send him away."

Maiblume caught his hand as he was turning to leave her.

"What is this you say?" she cried, breathlessly.

"Danger? I must not approach him? I see it all; he has some deadly infection about him, and you would expose yourself. Oh, George, don't go!"

The young man stood irresolute, gnawing his lip, and pressing convulsively the little hand that had caught his.

A low, weary cry came from the other side of the rock, and he broke from her as if he had received an electric shock.

"Pardon me; I *must* go to him; but, for Heaven's sake, don't you stir!" he implored, and he darted away.

A moment afterward she heard him in tones she had never heard before, seeming to chide the poor waif bitterly for wandering about thus, homeless and friendless. The cripple answered, weeping, that he was homeless and friendless indeed, and would the gentleman for God's sake take pity on him?

Then there was a silence, and stepping from her covert to look with sickening alarm for George Laurie, she saw nothing but the rough plateau of foam-sprinkled stones, the long wave sweeping in with gurgling murmur, and the gray cliff towering high.

Horried at this inexplicable disappearance Maiblume leaned dizzily against the stone, and for some moments fought off a hurried desire to scream for help and the chill faintness which was stealing over her.

She covered her face with her hands, and it seemed but a moment after when, looking up, she saw George standing before her alone.

"You are frightened," said he, very gently; "come, sit down here and recover yourself."

He led her to a flat stone; then he stood before her, looking down, oh, so earnestly and yet so sadly upon her.

"Maiblume," said he, almost in a whisper, "I have acted like a madman this evening." He came to a full stop, choked with emotion.

"Who was that strange being?" asked Maiblume.

"Ask nothing," said George, beseechingly. "You know I would tell you everything if it was—if it was—well for you to know it."

She sat dumb and astonished before him, not knowing what to think.

"Forget the waif," said George, still more imploringly; "never mention him, never allude to him, drop him from your speech and memory as completely as if he had never been."

"You ask a strange thing," said Maiblume, faintly. "Oh, that you would tell me why!"

"I can't!" groaned George. "I dare not!"

A chilling silence fell upon them both, and meanwhile the skies darkened and the waters gathered gloom.

"Why do you say you have acted like a madman this evening?" asked Maiblume, in a low voice fraught with pain.

"Because I have been foolish, impetuous and selfish," answered he, bitterly. "I forgot that any

bar lay between you and me, and presumed to offer— Oh, chase this from your memory too, Miss Verne; forgive my presumption, and forget it!”

She sat like a stone, her white face gleaming through the dusk; it seemed an eternity till she recollected herself, and with a little shiver rose from her low seat.

“Let us be friends, George, as we have been,” she said, in measured tones. “I grant both your requests, and will forget both the occurrences of to-night. Now take me back to papa! Yet wait—here is a handful of Coila’s dulse in this pool—so—that is enough—now come.”

And so they walked back again side by side, but the wild flowers dropped dew tears upon them, and there was no sound of chattering birds, and earth and sky seemed dim and cold—for the night was coming on apace.

The author and his secretary were in the study next morning busily employed as usual—the author marching to and fro, dictating with the voice of a general on the field of battle while his secretary’s pen moved swiftly and noiselessly over the fair white sheet.

The study was a dim, quiet room at the back of the cottage, lit from the end by a tall bay window, which looked out into a somber myrtle thicket, brightened here and there by some snow-white flowering shrub or the silvery leaves of prickly holly, whose roots were banked with scarlet geraniums.

The middle window was thrown wide that the gold-backed bee might flutter in and out, and the scent of unseen beds of mignonette, musk and verbena, might waft in to inspire the author.

As he marched about, Mr. Verne kept glancing ever and anon, somewhat sharply, at his young assistant, whose haggard, ill-slept looks and sternly-compressed lips betrayed a mind but ill at ease. At last he paused by George’s side, and, waiting until he had just finished the sentence, he slapped him on the back in his genial hearty way, and, descending from his Pegasus, said, in his most prosaic tone:

“What in the world’s the matter with you, boy? I’ve been watching you all the morning. Something’s on your mind, I could take my oath on’t.”

George, coloring deeply, laid down his pen and met his employer’s eyes with ingenuous frankness.

“Something *is* on my mind,” said he; “I’ve something to say which I fear will not be agreeable to you, and I’ve been puzzling my head all day to know how to say it.”

“Oh, I’m concerned in the business, am I?” said the kindly old author, drawing in a chair and sitting down close beside his young companion. “Tut! don’t be afraid! Speak out. Whatever it is, you’re in the right of it, I know.”

“But this,” said George, laughing, “this really is a most awkward request which I have to make.”

“Oh, ho! A request!” cried the author. “All right; go ahead; if you can stand it, I can.” And throwing himself back in his chair, he folded his arms and regarded George with a most indulgent air.

The author’s study was almost as cool and silvan as any lady’s bower of olden story. A carpet like forest moss covered the floor, gigantic vases of flowering shrubs and trailing vines stood here and there and everywhere; garlands of wild flowers hung about the bust of an angelically pure “Eve,” which surmounted the simple davenport, and wreathed a long mirror which, facing the middle window, displayed a picture very much after Rembrandt of the myrtle thicket with its stray gleams of silver leaves and lurid petals.

Was the cunning little smile which crept about the author’s mouth, as he glanced round upon all these evidences of Malblume’s constant care and loving service, caused by any reminiscence in which she and George figured.

“Mr. Verne,” said George, “circumstances have

arisen which make it absolutely necessary for me to board somewhere else than under your roof. I have to ask your permission to leave you every evening at eight o’clock. I shall be on duty as early as you please in the morning.”

The author started aghast.

An awkward request, indeed, for he was one of those erratic geniuses who, struck by a brilliant thought in the night, was constantly getting up to write it down in the most atrocious hand, and then in despair at the sight of the illegible hieroglyphics, was constantly obliged to summon George to create a readable copy of it in his dressing-gown.

“Bless my soul!” ejaculated he, “something desperate must have occurred! May I ask for any reason? Ah! ha! Ah! ha! I think I see light!” cried he, as the crimson mounted to George’s brow; and bending forward, he scrutinized the handsome young face opposite with the keenest relish. “*Somebody* has not smiled of late, and the foolish boy wants to run away from her,” said he, experimentally.

“No, no!” said George, overwhelmed with confusion. “That is not it, indeed; and that is another subject in connection with which I have a confession to make to you which is quite as awkward as my request.”

“Stop a bit,” said Barthold Verne; “one thing at a time. You want to live somewhere else than under my roof, and no fair lady is the cause of your wishing to leave me. Now, George, what is the reason? Have you any cause of dissatisfaction? Stanley, I know, is somewhat supercilious to you, but he does not live here—”

“Mr. Stanley has nothing whatever to do with this matter,” said George, hastily, “and—in fact, Mr. Verne, I can assign no cause. I am obliged it is right for me to do it—that’s all I can say.”

“All right, boy; that’s enough,” said Verne, heartily; “I haven’t seen you, morning, noon and night, for two years without learning to place implicit faith in your honor and integrity.”

“Thank you,” said the youth, earnestly, while his fine eyes shone with gratitude. “Your generous praise almost resigns me to my lot. You permit me to go, do you?”

“Certainly; where do you think of going?”

Again the young man flushed high, and gnawed his lips impatiently.

“That’s another thing I have to beg of you not to ask me,” said he, in deep vexation. “Oh, Mr. Verne, I dare scarcely hope that you will have patience with these petty mysteries, but they are thrust upon me, and I have no choice but to do as I am doing.”

The author betrayed his amazement by a short whistle, and burst into a roar of laughter.

“Oh! ho! ho! Ah! ah! ah! This would make a good novel! ‘The Mysterious Secretary,’ how would that sound? But come, now, my dear fellow, cheer up; don’t look so rueful, and, mind you,” he added, holding out his hand with frank cordiality, “if you are in real trouble, you are not to keep it all to yourself; you’re to tell me as much of it as will give me a chance to help you. Now, now, not a word!” exclaimed he, hastily, as George faltered forth his thanks. “Let’s have the confession. I think I can make a rough guess what it’s about.”

George covered his face with his hands for a few minutes; then, removing them, turned his gallant, boyish face, pallid with deep emotion, toward his employer.

“I don’t know how long I have loved her,” said he, softly; “I never knew my own presumption until I saw another trying his every art to win her. I could have borne the discovery of my own passion,” said George, faltering more and more, “I could have kept it to myself forever if I had seen her wooed by one who could make her happy—but, to witness her gradual entanglement in the net of one who is both wily and cruel—oh, pardon me! I don’t know what I say!”

“One who is both wily and cruel!” echoed Mr.

Verne, perfectly aghast. "My dear George, you are dreaming! Who sees Maiblume but yourself and me? Good heavens! you don't mean—you don't mean—Stanley?"

"Forgive me, Mr. Verne—indeed I have forgotten myself!" said George. "Let me go on with my confession. Last evening as we walked together—Miss Maiblume and I—beside the sea, the thought of her helplessness came over me—her helplessness and the wrecking of all her peace and happiness, should her father, whom she loves so well, desire her to marry one whose first wife's life was one of long sorrow."

"This is all nonsense, boy!" interrupted Mr. Verne, warmly. "Mere jealous fancies. My friend has no more thought of Maiblume than—well, than I have of little Coila! So you spoke to Maiblume, did you?"

"I had kept such a long constraint upon myself," said George, "that when at last my feelings carried me away, though I was dying to offer her my life-long homage and protection, I could not utter a word—but my looks spoke—and I think—I fear—she understood me."

"And what did she do? How did she act? Did she repulse you?" asked Mr. Verne, breathlessly.

"I have not dared to take the meaning of her looks," said George, sadly. "She did not repulse me, and I think she understood. We were interrupted before I had spoken, and, by the time I saw her again, I had remembered my duty to you and the hopeless difference between our stations."

"Good boy! Brave boy!" said Mr. Verne, rising to put his hand affectionately on his secretary's shoulder. "Now listen to me; I'm going to talk to you from my very heart."

As George raised his eyes in gratitude to his most indulgent of employers, from whom he had expected a very different reception of all he had to say that morning, he beheld a figure slipping into the myrtle thicket, in the mirror—Mr. Paul Stanley. Mr. Verne's back was to the mirror, and his eyes were glued to his secretary's face; he went on in his breezy, hearty voice, every syllable rolling out through the open window, and falling distinctly on the ear of the arrested poet.

"Men say I am a fool in money matters; well, perhaps I am; yet at fifty I could buy up many a keen speculator; I can no more speculate in my daughter's beauty than I can in stocks. Her heart is as sacred to my eyes as was the heart of her mother long ago when I entreated her to give it to me. God forbid, George, I should ever come between my child and the man she loves—if he is worthy of her. You are neither rich nor famous, but I do believe you are true as steel. So, boy, if you can get Maiblume's 'yes,' mine will not be wanting."

Little by little the youth had risen—the color coming and going in his eloquent young face—his heart filling to bursting with wild joy and amazement; and now, forgetful of the mirrored picture of the myrtle grove, and its dumb-struck listener, he seized both the author's hands, and wringing them convulsively, tried to speak, but burst into tears instead—whereupon the unworldly man of fiction caught him to his breast, and patted and soothed him like any woman.

Upon this tableau came Mr. Stanley, stepping through the open window, with a face like a demon.

"Verne," said he, in a hushed voice, "take care what you're about. I couldn't help hearing what you said to this young man, as I came down the walk, and as your friend—an older friend by far than he—I say, take care what you're about!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TEST OF A MAN'S HONOR.

AT these boding words, the author and his secretary started apart, both struck speechless for the moment by the manner no less than by the words of the intruder.

"I don't speak without cause," said Stanley, folding his arms and drawing himself up to his full height. "I know too well—too well that the man whom you are taking to your unsuspecting heart as the lover of your precious daughter is a destroyer of family peace—a meddler between husband and wife—a black, traitorous hound, fit only to be chased from good men's houses, with disgust and indignation!"

"Hold—hold, Stanley!" cried the author, aghast. "These are terrible things to say of one whom I love as if he were my own son!"

"They are true!" returned Stanley. "Look at him cringing there! Can he deny them? Speak, young man, be honest. Have I no cause to curse and condemn you?"

George, looking steadily at him, caught a glimpse over his shoulder at the myrtle thicket, and of another figure, sweet and stately, pacing between the flowers—Maiblume, with alarm in her eyes, hurrying toward the study window. The shock of this discovery froze the words upon his lips; he stood dumb—confounded.

A laugh of biting scorn broke from Stanley, while Verne, watching George anxiously, grew a shade paler and sunk into his chair.

"What say you, Verne?" cried Stanley. "Does this look like innocence or guilt? Is this George Laurie worthy of the confidence you have reposed in him?"

"George," said the author, imploringly, "have you nothing to say for yourself? What does Mr. Stanley mean?"

George, gazing still in the myrtle thicket, made a gesture of despair. Maiblume, having distinctly heard the words both of the poet and of her father, stood motionless with blank, blanched face, and hands pressed upon her heart.

"What! not one word! No ready lie at your command? No specious explanation, false and fawning as your own nature?" flouted Stanley, scornfully. "Look at your precious favorite, Verne; is he not a notable personification of injured innocence?"

"God forgive you, man, but you have a bitter tongue!" groaned Mr. Verne. "George—George, my boy, speak, if you love me—if you love her, my poor Maiblume! Explain what Mr. Stanley means, I pray you, explain!"

George Laurie, never removing his fascinated gaze from the awful countenance of the woman he adored, made shift to answer these imploring prayers.

"Mr. Stanley suspects me of interfering between his late wife and himself. I have already assured him to the contrary, but he will not take my word."

"Not against proofs of the accuracy of my worst suspicions!" said Stanley, darkly. "How came you to know a secret connected with my wife's past history which she never confessed to me? How came you to know that my wife made a will, a circumstance which she never confided to me? Why did she call for you when upon her death-bed instead of me? Why did you refuse to explain your connection with her when after her interment I, thinking I had some right to the knowledge, demanded an explanation? Come, sir, answer all these questions now, before my old friend, ere you dare to hope that his confidence will be restored!"

"That seems simple justice," said Verne; "dear boy, be candid. I can't judge you hardly—I love you!"

Tears were in the warm-hearted fellow's eyes as he made this appeal; it was hard—hard to resist him!

"Oh, God, remember!" groaned the youth, covering his face.

"For Maiblume's sake, speak out!" entreated Verne, going to him and leaning fondly upon his shoulder; "I want her to be happy, and I think she can only be happy with you. For her sake, speak!"

"Yes, for her sake speak!" echoed Stanley, be-

between his teeth; "the truth will cure both father and daughter of their misplaced affection."

George raised his face; it was cold and white, but a brave smile was on his lips and his eyes flashed dauntlessly. He looked at his friend—great-hearted Verne who loved like a child and shrunk like an angel from the ugliness of sin; he cast a last glance upon fair Maiblume, listening with white, parted lips and heaving bosom for his reply; and then he spoke distinctly, decisively.

"Honor forbids me to make the explanation required by Mr. Stanley. Mrs. Stanley reposed a confidence in me which she did not repose in her husband—because I stumbled upon the truth and she could not help herself. I cannot betray her confidence—I will never betray it as long as God gives me strength to act a manly part by the dead."

A cry of derision burst from Stanley; Verne turned away with a passing ejaculation; but George was deaf to both, for Maiblume had thrown up her clasped hands toward Heaven, lifting a face of wildest anguish, and was now flitting away among the shadows with bowed and unsteady feet.

"Nonsense! dear Verne; be a man!" remonstrated Stanley, leading him to a distant lounge; "what is this miserable fellow that he should have the power to trouble you so? Put him back in his own place, or better still, dismiss him; I will engage to get you as competent a secretary and a more honorable one in a few days."

"Silence, Stanley! I can't hear you speak thus," exclaimed the author, sternly. "I never saw a man with God's truth written more plainly on his face. He may be rash and impulsive—brave hearts are often so; but my oath on it, he is incapable of treachery or vice."

"You are infatuated!" cried Stanley; "you are actually going to sacrifice your daughter to this person notwithstanding my warning?"

Verne writhed away from this Job's comforter and marched about the room, sighing audibly in the most disconsolate manner. At length he stopped in front of George, and eyed him with a yearning intensity.

"Boy, you really think it your duty to keep a secret of the late Mrs. Stanley's from Mr. Stanley?" inquired he.

"God knows that honor is the only barrier in the way of a full explanation," returned George.

"And the other things you mentioned this morning—the mystery we laughed about," said the author, with glistening eyes; "is that connected with the same affair?"

"Please, dear, generous friend, ask me nothing!" whispered George, passionately. "Through no act of mine I am forced to deny you my confidence on this and on the other point. I can only beseech you to trust in my honor as you have always done hitherto."

"George," said the author, seizing his hand in a burst of confidence, "I could take you upon trust, I could believe in you whatever appearances said; but I dare not let Maiblume take you upon trust; you see?"

"I see too clearly, alas!" sighed George.

"You must clear yourself of these imputations and be able to stand up unblemished before the world, ere I consent to your speaking to Maiblume," said Mr. Verne, very sadly; "she is my own child—my darling; don't think me cruel or unjust!"

"I can't think you that, Mr. Verne," replied George, profoundly affected; "some day, please Heaven, you will see that your great kindness has not been misplaced."

With a convulsive pressure of the author's hand, and a slight, cold bow to the sneering poet, George left the room.

While this interview was taking place in Mr. Verne's study, little Coila was tripping bare-footed among the periwinkles and sea anemones, the foam-bubbles and the tangled heaps of sea-ware on the

beach. Her broad straw hat was tipped jauntily over her radiant eyes; her long thick black hair, swung on the salt breeze, and her smart scarlet bathing-dress fringed and tasseled like any Turkish Sultana's, glowed in the noon sun.

Coila was making up her mind to adventure her "nice, warm, dry little body into the cold damp sea," and as this was usually a process of some duration, Maiblume had not as yet joined her, preferring to come in at the crisis, when, tremors and alarms over, mademoiselle was singing mermaid songs in the sea.

How she laughed as she pressed her little pearly toes upon the tiny shells, not half so pink and smooth, and crushed the little wonders, occupants and all, into ruin. How she danced round the frightened crabs that tried to scurry into the sheltering pools of the big black rocks! How she brimmed with gleeful mischief, when, running out after the edge of the retiring wave, she sent up a cloud of startled sand-birds before her! Such a merry Thalia never danced along that solitary beach, I trow. She might have been a "water baby" come out of the rocks to play at being a human child!

All at once, dancing round a jutting rock, she tripped over the sea-glass of a man who was lying upon his face behind the rocks, with his elbows buried in the sand, his chin on his palm, and his one eye fixed, with the gravity of a Solon, on the blank horizon.

"Mon dieu, monsieur! Ten thousand pardons!" cried the young lady, recovering herself, with French address and executing a ravishing little bow and smile.

The gentleman jumped up with a muttered:

"By George! It is a real woman or a fairy!"

To which mademoiselle responded with a silvery peal of laughter—moving toward the sea, however, as if to escape therein, should his evident admiration take any more tangible shape than looks.

The gentleman was possessed of a sallow, coffee-colored complexion, silky black mustache and whiskers, prominent glistening brown eyes which had a trick of rolling in their sockets, and peeping at one out of their corners with a sly laughing devil in them, always ready to mock at one, while from his curly lips issued only careless jests and laughter. He had also long brown sinewy hands, which when he spoke, he placed meekly palm to palm, as if supplicating the forbearance of all who heard him. His general appearance was that of a gentleman in very free and easy costume—a gentleman who meant to enjoy his holiday and no nonsense about it.

"Madame!" said he, entreatingly; "stand there; don't move a muscle, I beg. I must sketch you. I never saw any thing half so much worth sketching, and I believe the world knows something of Nowell Wylie's pencil, too."

"Ah, an artist!" murmured Coila, taking a step nearer and falling into a yet more ravishing pose.

"Delicious!" cried Mr. Wylie, seizing his portfolio, dumping down on the first rock and plying his crayon with immense gusto.

"Yes, I am an artist—a caricaturist—don't move for the world. I'm not caricaturing you; that would be sacrilege! In return for your goodness, I must show you the contents of my portfolio—they'll amuse you I know. Ah, now I've caught your outline! Jehosaphat! It's nothing but beauty curves! May I trespass on your kindness a few moments longer? I should so much like to catch that inimitable expression. Do you know where a gentleman by the name of Verne lives? I have a letter of introduction to him, and I am such a profoundly lazy fellow, that if I can find a thing out by asking, I always save my legs at the expense of my tongue."

"Monsieur Verne? Oh, my dear papa Verne!" exclaimed the little mademoiselle, looking archly at

the queer artist "shall myself conduct you to the retreat of Monsieur Verne."

"Thank you! thank you!" returned the gentleman, with admiring fervor, as he hastened to select a card from his very handsome gold-mounted card case. "You are, then, his daughter?"

"His adopted daughter," murmured Coila, looking down with an air of gentle sadness. "I am a homeless little Frenchwoman, a stranger in this great land of yours; but monsieur papa and mademoiselle *ma sœur* Verne, have taken me into their hearts, and I love—ah! I am devoted to them."

The artist stared at her; his brown eyes filled with unfeigned admiration.

"Jerusalem! She's an out-and-outer!" muttered he—"a perfect witch!" and he continued to stare point blank, apparently lost to all sense of propriety.

"Monsieur speaks!" said Coila, her little head on one side, and her coral lips apart in innocent expectation.

"Ahem! Yes!" said the artist, recovering himself. "Here is my card; and now, if you'll give me your name, I guess we'll commence our acquaintance on the square, and all the Grundies on the planet will find nothing to say."

He stepped down the wet sand, holding out the bit of card-board, and she, with fawn-like timidity, allowed him to come just near enough to hand it to her at arm's length; then, with a pirouette that scarcely left a mark upon the yellow floor, she skimmed off to the lace-fringed skirt of the tide, and stood with her little feet imbedded in foam, demurely scanning his name.

"Charmed to make the acquaintance of Monsieur Nowell Wylie!" cried she, executing a reverence, which, considering her lack of sweeping robes, was a marvel of stately grace. "My name is Coila De Vouse. And now, if you will excuse me, I shall return very soon and show you the way to my papa's cottage." With this and a parting wave of her pretty hand, she flashed away like a little fire spirit, and was lost to the artist's view round the jutting rock; whereupon he resealed himself; stuck his long hands between his knees, and elevating his quizzical eyebrows to the roots of his hair, fastened his great absurd brown eyes upon the heaving main, with a look which suggested anything but romantic reverie.

CHAPTER IX.

A BRAVE HEART'S GOOD-BY.

A WEEK or two have passed. How stands the game now?

Mr. Wylie, an eminent New York caricaturist, bearing a letter of introduction to Barthold Verne from a well-known publisher of that city, is a daily visitor, not only of the author's, but of his lovely children Maiblume and Coila. He cheerfully "roughs it" in the village, sleeping in a whitewashed bedroom the size of a bandbox, and smoking all night to keep the musketoes at bay; eats flapjacks and hominy with pious thanksgiving, and hob-nobs with brown-handed farmers between the turnip-rows—all for the felicity of dawdling some hours every day beside the ladies of the cottage.

Such an amusing man! He has been all over the world; gives such graphic descriptions of what he has seen; and his portfolio is crammed with burlesques of everything, from a German cathedral to a Brazilian worker in the diamond mines.

Coila thinks he is better than the *Paris cirque*, and even Maiblume's sad face sometimes brightens before his spirit of mocking gayety.

Mr. Verne is in great trouble meanwhile; his big, honest heart is torn between conflicting emotions; he is learning, for the first time, the bitter lessons of suspicion and distrust. He who judged all men by his own sterling self, is gradually finding out that some who seem fair without, have hearts as black as sin—and the hardly learned knowledge is crushing him, hour by hour.

Paul Stanley is his master here, and teaches him the hateful lesson with untiring assiduity.

George Laurie comes and goes, haggard, careworn, and abstracted, yet obstinately silent about the meaning of the change in him. He sees the altered looks of his dear friend and master; he sees the blighting shadow upon Maiblume; he knows that his happiness and all his hopes for the future are being whispered away by one whose hatred is bitter as death, relentless as the grave—Paul Stanley, whom a word of his would make his friend.

That word he cannot, will not speak, even for the sweet sakes of friendship and of love, for, true as steel, he will die rather than betray his trust.

At last comes a crisis. George, riding into the hamlet in his usual mad haste that he might not keep the author waiting a moment for him in the study, encountered Stanley's ironical stare as he threw himself from his panting horse at the village hostelry.

The peculiar malignity of that look struck like an ice-bolt to the youth's heart, and he pursued his way to the cottage even more dejectedly than usual, for grief and care sat heavily upon him, and dark forebodings beset him that he had not fathomed the depth of his misfortune yet.

"I am in chains," moaned George, as all his bright prospects seemed darkening before him. "Chained by her dead hand, and honor rivets my fetters. Oh, that I may not act a coward's part whatever befalls me!"

He hurried into Mr. Verne's presence, and was scarcely surprised when the author did not raise his pale and troubled face to greet him.

George sat down to his work, and oh! how heavily the moments dragged with that desponding figure opposite him, so different from that which usually marched up and down with gay and jaunty tread, declaiming brilliant society hits, and delicately-tender love-episodes.

The secretary's pen moved more and more slowly, while his eyes wandered more and more frequently toward the silent author.

At last he threw down the pen, buried his face in his hands, and gave himself up to a short but terrible mental struggle. When he looked up, his face seemed to shine with brave and patient resignation—that handsome, boyish face, which had made the sunshine of the author's study for many a happy day.

"Mr. Verne," said he, in his simple, direct way, "the state of things between us is getting to be about too much for you. I want to put an end to it to-day."

Verne looked at him yearningly.

"Yes, George," said he, faintly.

"I see that you have lost all confidence in me," continued George, "and that you will never regain it until I explain every thing that I have been keeping secret."

"That's it! That's it, boy!" said the author, his eyes glistening with hope and expectation. "Explain every thing—make a clean breast of it—I will never judge you harshly."

For a moment or two they looked at each other with strange intensity. Oh, the fond longing which filled the author's heart to overflowing! Oh, the luring temptation that struggled hard with principle in George's breast!

"Explain!" said he, in a low voice of pain. "God knows I would have done so long ago had it been any wrong-doing of mine. I have done nothing which you would not approve of, Mr. Verne. This secret is not mine, but another's, and I am bound in honor to keep it."

"Hush! Hush! You are obdurate as a stone!" cried Mr. Verne, in sudden and fierce excitement.

"Stanley must be right! He has told me all about your presumptuous interference between him and his wife; was there no wrong-doing in that? And now this new mystery—this hiding of yourself every night—what explanation can be given but that some

shameful secret connected with your past has started up at this *mal apropos* season when you were about to win my heiress's hand— Oh, God! that such a face should hide a vice-blackened heart!"

"Stop!" cried George, springing to his feet, as if touched with the red-hot fingers of Torquemada. "You try me too much; I can't bear this! My secret! My past! What have I to do with it? In God's name, send for Stanley and let me tell the truth—" He stopped; the wild flush faded from his cheek, the flashing fire dimming in his eye. "No," said he, clenching his hands, "I will never save myself by such a poltroon's course!"

Verne, who stood with the bell-rope in his hand, beaming with exultation, dropped it with a cry of grief and anger piteous to hear.

"No!" reiterated George, more calmly, while the same shining serenity overspread his care-worn face; "my dear mother used to say to me, 'Do right though the heavens should fall.' To keep silence on this subject is what I think right, and I shall do it, though all that makes a heaven on earth to me should fall in ruins round me. Let me say what I intended to say when I interrupted your reverie. Mr. Stanley thinks he has cause to hate me; he has not; but as I can not prove that he has not, he will continue to hate me to the end of the chapter. You and he are friends of many years' standing, and you have the highest respect for his opinions. You can't be comfortable as long as I am here, a daily subject of contention between you. I began by saying that I must put an end to that state of matters to-day; I can only do so by resigning my situation as your secretary."

His voice died away in husky murmurs, for dearly he loved the man who had ever been so truly kind to him, but his face still shone with that pure, proud strength.

Verne writhed in his chair, changed color, gnawed his lip, and finally two big tears rolled down his cheeks, and he looked up in the heroic face with harrowing entreaty.

"I am a fool, I dare say," said he, "but I can't believe you false, George—I can't believe you unworthy! If you go away, you'll break my heart—and Maiblume's, too—poor Maiblume!"

"Oh, have mercy!" gasped George, trembling. "You tempt me *too* much! It is cruel! I must go—I couldn't stay another hour here, or I should forget myself and prove indeed both false and unworthy."

Mr. Verne turned away abruptly, and, leaning his forehead against the window-pane, remained silent for a long time; but George could see by the movement of his shoulders that he was sobbing like a great boy.

By and by he turned round, his face suspiciously glistening; and said, with a forlorn attempt at frigid majesty:

"Yes, Mr. Laurie, I see it is best for us to part. Since you are quite willing to give us all up for the sake of some Quixotic scruple, it is evidently the best thing to do. You will find what is due of your salary in the drawer, there, and the girls are at hand, I dare say, if you wish to bid them good-by. You don't wish to? Oh, very well—perhaps it is better so! Good-by, then—and—and—God bless and keep you, boy, wherever you go!" He wrung George's hand convulsively, broke down, and hurried from the study.

George left the house a few minutes afterward, with a heart that was bursting with grief. In all his bright, short life nothing like this had ever befallen him; love, honor, respect, had ever been accorded him.

And now!

Homeless, friendless, enveloped in a cloud of suspicion and distrust—oh, it was hard to bear!

In his distress he had hoped to slip away without the agony of encountering Maiblume, but this was not to be.

He came upon a very silvan group beneath a wide spreading cedar in the grassy lane which led to the hamlet: Maiblume, Coila, Mr. Paul Stanley and Mr.

Nowell Wylie, all reclining in languid attitudes on the flower-gemmed grass.

Stanley's richly curled head lay upon the gauzy hem of Maiblume's draperies, and his full eyes, passion-fired, rested upon her pallid, half-averted face.

Mr. Wylie, his back propped up against the trunk of the tree and his sketch-book on his knees, made shift to pass the time agreeably by handing cartoons by the gross to the chattering Coila; who, in a diaphanous cloud of rose tinted frippery, reposed by Stanley's side at Maiblume's feet; and with innocent wile sought to lure that gentleman from his unwelcome worship at her grieving Maiblume's shrine; and this in spite of the shrinking timidity with which she had never ceased to regard the gifted bard. Devoted Coila! No wonder if Maiblume's cold, trembling hand often stole with grateful pressure into hers; no wonder if the admiring Wylie turned his great globular eyes upward as if appealing to the heavens to behold and reward such beauteous self-sacrifice; no wonder if even the infatuated poet himself sometimes glanced her way with lazy interest in his beauty-loving eye!

Upon this pastoral idyl came George Laurie, haggard, broken-hearted, with despair in his hurried gait.

"Oh! George!" gasped Maiblume, hearing and seeing him first as only Love can hear and see; and she rose with her dear hands outstretched as if to grasp and comfort him, while all the dainty color forsook her quivering lips, and the big tears brimmed in her exquisite eyes.

Coila, too, uttered a tiny scream of sore dismay, and ran out to him and stopped him.

He saw he was in for it, and like a brave man he gulped down his heart for that time and met it right gallantly.

He took Coila's clinging hand and walking with her into their midst said with a smile:

"I thought I was not to see you again, ladies, but Fate is kinder to me than I deserve. Circumstances have arisen which make it necessary for me to leave Stormcliff, and your father's service, Miss Verne, without delay. In fact I have bid him good-by and am going now."

Paler and paler waxed the stately Maiblume till no lily-of-the-vale could out rival her in bloodless purity; and a woeful shadow crept into her dilating eyes.

"You leave us now—forever?" faltered she, unconsciously wringing her slight hands.

"Now, and forever!" answered George, low-voiced, while all the heroism in his heart trembled on its throne.

She gave him one look. Oh, agony! Love—reproach—despair appealed to him to be merciful to her, to remember her even at the expense of Honor!

He looked—hesitated—tattered on the brink of a wild discomfiture. Love luring him on, Love pushing him forward; when—thank God! his good angel snatched him back, whispering:

"Be true to your trust!"

He turned away, white to the lips, but smiling bravely.

"It is inevitable; I must go, indeed," said he, and taking her ice-cold, passive hand, he pressed one thrilling kiss upon it and hurried away, quite oblivious of the presence of all the others.

The dead hush was broken by Coila bursting into a passion of tears; whereupon both the gentlemen awoke from their rigid petrification and hastened to calm and soothe her.

And presently, glancing with some timidity, but with devouring curiosity at Maiblume to see how she sustained the loss of her father's secretary, Stanley had the felicity of discovering that she had quietly fainted away.

CHAPTER X.

THE CHILD PRISONER.

MR. NOWELL WYLIE, with rare delicacy, excused himself at this juncture and disappeared like a flash.

He reached the hamlet in time to see George starting in a light wagon, with a lad to drive it, from the hostelry before mentioned; whereupon, after waiting until he was almost out of sight, Mr. Wylie, as if seized with the spirit of imitation, got himself a horse and saddle, and trotted off in pursuit.

The wagon drove at a dashing rate through the hilly country, neither driver nor passenger looking back; and the equestrian followed, broiling under the noon sun, but seemingly quite resigned to the infliction and even enjoying it.

The sly twinkle of those rolling eyes as the hot dust rose in stifling clouds under the horse's hoofs; as he wiped the streaming perspiration from his face and neck; as the winding road took him up and up among the fir-clad hills where not a breath was stirring, and even the grasshoppers chirped faintly on the scorching soil!

The silent, chuckling triumph of the fellow, as his horse, with drooping head and reeking sides, at last walked into a bustling townlet after the wagon; as pausing in a by-street, while George dismissed his team and hurried off again on foot, he stealthily kept him in sight, till clear of the houses, he saw him trudging higher and higher among the hills; as stabling his horse on the outskirts of the village, he ran after him, and slouching his hat down over his olive-colored physiognomy and muffling his chin in his scarf, he stole so near that he could distinctly see the convulsive working of George's hands, and hear his broken murmurs of despair!

All at once George stepped off the highway and plunged into the deep cedar forest through which it wound.

The artist, twisting his flexible features into a frightful grin of ecstasy, plunged in after him.

It was but a broken footpath, grown up in many places, and rendered slippery as ice, though soft as a carpet, by the deep layers of cedar spines which successive seasons had dropped upon it.

No footfall could be heard here, and the only guide which the pursuer had was the sound made by George as he pushed his way through the rustling, crackling undergrowth; yet he boldly held on his way, apparently only stimulated by fresh difficulties.

Up! up! every moment mounting higher; while the tangled briers and sharp-thorned vines scratched and tore them; while the breathless air, rank with the death odors of rotting vegetation and laden with miasma from moist, unsunned bogs, seemed to choke them; while the green snake undulated across their path, and the big drab-coated toad hopped into the covert of yellow fungi to look out at them with black bead eyes; up! up! till Mr. Wylie was forced to divest himself of muffler and coat, and puffing and panting like a grampus, to toil on with his hand on his side; and yet George never slackened speed, and he never thought of giving up the chase!

At last, far from village, highway or path; hidden in the heart of the cedar forest on the mountain top—they came upon a ruined mansion!

"Ha!" snorted Mr. Wylie, with a very demon of glee in his eye; "now for Rosamond's bower!"

He fell behind, and sheltering himself under the tangled brake, reconnoitered the precincts and fetched his breath.

A crumbling stone house it was, built after the fashion of a Swiss chalet, with peaked roof and numberless verandas. Smothered it well-nigh was in the riotous luxuriance of weeds and creepers which swathed it about from broken piazza to ruined chimney; its pleasure grounds were wastes of foliage; its ornamental trees grotesque caricatures of themselves; its very windows, yawning for lack of sash or pane, were choked up with flossy vines and rank flowers.

George sat down on the piazza steps to rest and think.

Mr. Wylie took the opportunity to make the circuit, at a safe distance, of the house.

At that side which was opposite to the entrance where George sat, he observed a wonder in that desolate place—a whole window with a thin white curtain drawn across it. Some yew trees, black as night, jealously screened this marvel from all casual eyes; but Mr. Wylie's were sharp and keen as a ferret's; he saw, and burned to see more.

He crept, bit by bit through the shrouding shrubbery till he reached the window, and, hiding himself in the very heart of the yew tree opposite, he awaited results.

He was just in time; a moment afterward he heard footsteps in the room, then some one swept aside the muslin blind, and threw wide the window.

It was George, with a smile on his pale face, and pleasant words on his lips.

"Yes, early to-day, dear Aubrey; and better still, I sha'n't leave you again," he was saying.

Mr. Wylie almost dislocated his neck trying to see the other occupant of the room; but it was not until George turned back and bent caressingly over a large invalid chair, that the gifted artist beheld a boy of perhaps thirteen, leaning back with languid hands hanging down, and sharp white face upturned. The face of a Gabriel!

Blue-eyed, pallid, golden-haired—a beautiful, an enchanting face!

Was it the sight of such unexpected grace that stirred the artist's soul so profoundly, as to leave Mr. Wylie gaping and staring at the child as if he had seen a specter? Or was it the shock of discovery, that all this loveliness could be marred in a moment by a dark and sullen frown?

"I am weary of staying here!" cried the boy, petulantly. "Why do you hide me away in this dreadful lonely place? I was better limping about the road-side, for then I could see people and I hadn't to be alone all day."

"You sha'n't be alone any longer, my poor child," said George, arranging with gentle care the pillows behind him, and putting closer to him a little table on which stood some food, a jug of milk and a basket of fruit. "I will take you away from this place whenever you are able to travel."

"And meantime you let me pine here, you let me pine here day by day. I shall never get better!" said the boy, with a burst of angry tears. "Why do you treat me so, Mr. Laurie? what have I done to be shut up and hidden away like a prisoner or a fugitive?"

"Dear Aubrey, you shall not be shut up much longer," answered George, patiently; "get strong as soon as you can. I sha'n't leave you again until you are well."

"I am well now; take me away from this place!" exclaimed the boy.

"No! No! Not well enough for the journey we must take," sighed George. "I want to take you to my mother, Aubrey; she will be a mother, I know, to you, for she is good as the angels in heaven. She is an invalid and has gone South to Florida for her health—a long, toilsome journey for one so weak as you; you don't know how closely you skirted the edge of a dangerous illness, my poor boy, nor how very frail your strength is yet. Those terrible weeks of exposure were almost too much, for one so delicately nurtured and as feeble as you."

"Why—why do you taunt me with my beggary?" cried Aubrey, clenching his thin hands in impotent fury.

"Taunt you?" murmured George. "No! No! No!"

"You only do it to remind me that I am in your power!" continued the boy, never heeding him, and plucking at his long bright hair as if he would tear it from its roots. "You keep me here, your prisoner—hidden away from every one, that you may force me to buy my freedom of you. You have found out whose child I am! I am some great person's

hair—I felt that I was—and you are hoping to make your fortune out of me!”

George recoiled from the dreadful elf-like being while a wave of bitter anguish swept over his face.

Was this the reward of his heroism? This vaunting ingratitude—these foolish reproaches?

Involuntarily the concealed artist cast a keen glance about the tidy room, filled with every comfort which tender care and kind solicitude could suggest. Rough only where the unskilled hands of the secretary had framed table, chair and bedstead out of the old boards which had lain there for years. But what toil, what thought, what expense had the varied items cost

Mr. Wylie emitted a sniff of intense disgust.

George must have heard the graceful sound, for, next moment, he stood at the window listening with a scarlet look; and entreating the boy with urgent gesture to keep silence.

At length, satisfied that he must have been deceived, he turned back into the room and, taking a seat beside his fretful charge, took both the boy's shadowy hands within his own, and said very softly and tenderly:

“My poor Aubrey, dismiss these idle fancies from your brain; there is not the slightest foundation for them; some day I will tell you why I kept you concealed in this lonely place, but not yet—you are too young. You must be a man first with a man's strong heart to meet sorrow right valiantly, and to overcome it by a brave and patient life.”

“There is foundation for my fancy,” wept the boy. “I am a lady's child; she used to come and see me; you are hiding me from her. Oh, Mr. Laurie, I'll die if you don't give me up to her, she loved me so! When she came to the Home and saw me among all the other children, she ran to me crying and sobbing, and took me in her arms, and called me her beautiful boy. Oh, do take me to her, or I'll run away from you as I did from the Home to search for her!”

“Hugh, my child,” said George, soothingly; “you speak the wildest nonsense. Whoever she was, think no more of her.”

Aubrey burst into a wilder passion of tears and in the bitterest language taunted and reproached his benefactor, who became so absorbed in the task of calming him that Mr. Wylie found an opportunity of wriggling out of his uneasy resting-place and of escaping into the covert of the woods. Arrived at a point beyond the range of the *chalet*, he sat him down on a mossy windfall, and after elevating his eyebrows and shrugging his shoulders for some minutes in the hope of relieving his overcharged feelings, he drew from his pocket an envelope containing a number of photographs, and, shuffling over these works of art, he selected one and glued his globular eyes upon it.

“By the jumping Jehosaphat!” exclaimed Mr. Wylie, “this is the rummest go yet!”

He solemnly returned the photograph to the envelope, secreted that, and taking up the bijou compass which dangled at his watch-chain, proceeded placidly to find his way down the mountain, arriving in due course of time safe and sound at the little town. Here he took some pains to secure himself a comfortable dinner, and, having discussed the same with philosophical serenity, he trotted back to Stormcliff in the evening a much wiser man than when he had set out.

CHAPTER XI.

ARTFUL MADEMOISELLE.

A FEW evenings subsequently the man whom Coila thought “more amusing than the Paris *cirque*,” proposed that, instead of returning soberly with the others along the quiet lane from the back, he would show her a far more interesting and adventurous path on the top of the cliffs.

Now Coila was such an affectionate little witch that I don't believe she would have consented to leave her beloved papa Verne, who, at this time, took

more and more comfort in her artless fondness, had Mr. Stanley and Maiblume not been walking in the rear—to whom she could confide him, thus giving him the rare pleasure of walking with his Maiblume, and at the same time interrupting a *lete-a-lete* which, child though she was in mind and heart, she could read was irksome to her idolized Maiblume.

That was why she consented to trip away by the stranger's side, while the twilight gathered closer, and the broad, burnished moon peeped over the sea, lighting up her small spirituelle face and her big black eyes, till she seemed like some sprite bent on elfish mischief.

“I say, Miss De Vouse,” quoth the artist, taking her fairy hand to lead her up the rough defile, “ain't these two going it, now the secretary's out of the way?”

“Eh! monsieur means? What *does* monsieur mean?” queried she, with delicious simplicity.

“I mean that the widower and Miss Verne are going to make a match of it,” said he, rolling his eyes into their corners to get a good look at her.

Coila uttered a shrill, tiny cry, and stood still that she might stamp her little foot.

“Ah! Bah! But clever Monsieur Wylie makes the ridiculous blunder this time! Miss Verne! She will never marry unless she marries Monsieur George!”

“Stanley's bound to have her,” said Mr. Wylie, “and unless somebody stops him he'll have his way.”

“He sha'n't! He sha'n't!” reiterated Coila, with another fierce stamp of her tiny foot. “My heart! she would die of grief in a week!”

“Why don't you go for him yourself then, and save her life?” drawled Mr. Wylie, helping her over another steep bowlder.

She lit like a bird at his side, and waving her white hands like snowy wings cried, passionately:

“I would *die* to save my Maiblume—but to marry monsieur, the poet— Oh, Sainte Virge, succor me in this strait!”

“I believe you could have him if you took the trouble,” said Mr. Wylie, with admiring warmth. “Blest if I don't sometimes feel fit to pop the question myself, crusty old bachelor as I am—but you wouldn't look at me if I did, so I won't transform myself into a middle-aged adorer.”

She averted her modest face from these ardent compliments, and tried coyly to pluck her fingers from his as they climbed higher; but he only pressed them closer, continuing, after a season of dumb mirth:

“Or if you won't rid Miss Verne of her unwelcome admirer that way, why don't you set your sharp little wits to work to do it some other way?”

“Ah, monsieur, my wits they are dull to scheme!” sighed Coila; “but my heart is hot to work for Maiblume. Tell me what I can do, my friend?”

By this time they had arrived at the top of the cliff, and were pacing slowly along the thyme-carpeted plain, with the wrinkled ocean moving far beneath, and spanned by a silver bridge flung by Luna.

There was a hush up here never to be obtained down by the sounding sea; a feeling of loneliness and isolation which might have quite disconcerted a creature as shy and easily alarmed as was tender mademoiselle; but her beautiful devotion toward her adopted sister inspired her with courage; she looked up in Mr. Wylie's eyes with shining expectation in her own, and tightened her clasp of his hand in urgent appeal.

For once Mr. Wylie was not ready with an answer.

He knitted his brows, coughed uneasily, cast upon her several side glances of surpassing keenness, and at last spoke:

“I suppose you believe, like all good Catholics, in pious frauds,” he commenced.

She opened her innocent, wide eyes wider.

“*Eh bien! monsieur!* You speak in riddles!” cried the fresh, young voice in wondering accents.

"Ugh!" grunted Mr. Wylie, impatiently. "I'm afraid you haven't the pluck, after all."

"Dear friend," said Coila, modestly, "I'm a foolish little one, but when I love I have what you call the valor, too. Confide your scheme—you shall see!"

"All right. I'll tell you what a spirited woman would do under the circumstances," said the artist, somewhat reassured. "She'd just go to work to draw the wool over the widower's eyes—"

"Eh? Monsieur means?"

"Well, to be candid, I mean that if you'd set your fascinations to work to draw him off from Miss Verne, I bet a cool ten thousand that in a week he'd be following you about like a dog. All pretense on your part of course, but it would relieve Miss Verne of his attentions, and, at the same time, give young Laurie a chance to vindicate himself and make up matters with Miss Verne again."

Coila clapped her little soft hands in a burst of applause.

"Excellent!" cried she. "For Maiblume's sake I will begin at once. But oh, how I dread monsieur the poet!" faltered she, relapsing into timidity. "I tremble when he looks at me. How do I fear him so, dear Monsieur Wylie?"

Mr. Wylie came to a standstill, and, fixing his eyes with solemn earnestness upon hers, said more impressively than she had ever heard him speak:

"You, and all innocent little creatures like you, flutter affrightedly before Paul Stanley, as the flutty little bird does before the serpent—fascinated by his graceful exterior in spite of the inward monitor which declares him to be a monster. Do you know, Miss Coila, that I, and in fact a lot of people in the city, have had some very queer suspicions about Mr. Paul Stanley ever since that dreadful affair, the death of his wife, and the suppression of her will?"

Coila's uplooking eyes, into which the moonbeams shone as into two limpid pools, flinched, and her whole face quivered—only for a moment though: the next, she was looking with wonder and dismay at Mr. Wylie:

"Oh, what a cruel suspicion!" cried she. "I cannot believe this, monsieur. Why should Monsieur Stanley do such a wicked thing?"

"Why, you innocent daisy," exclaimed Mr. Wylie, so charmed by her simplicity that he took her by the chin and raised her face that he might look at it more closely. "Didn't he come into a big fortune by the transaction? Who else profited by it? Who else had any motive for suppressing Mrs. Stanley's will? Eh? Do you know of any one?"

"Ah, no, no!" cried Coila, her sweet eyes swimming in tears. "Poor madame! Dear Madame Stanley!"

Mr. Wylie dropped her chin with an inarticulate growl, and, rubbing his hands softly, stood off to view her, as if she were some piece of art.

"All right!" said he at last. "Time will show; murder will out," as the detectives say when the knave has given them the slip; and I tell you, my little half-blown blossom with the dew yet glistening on your innocent leaves, that, sooner or later, the world will hear who stole Mrs. Stanley's will."

She stood a moment breathless, actually gazing in horror at the artist, then she shrugged her shoulders, crying, petulantly:

"You terrible man! Don't talk thus any longer! You make me feel as if I were surrounded by wickedness and treachery. *Tout bien!* Time shall show, indeed!" and waving him to follow, she lifted her floating train and led the way along the summit of the cliff.

Mr. Wylie sauntered after her, his hands plunged deep into his pockets, his mouth open, and his eyes upturned to the heavens till only the whites were visible, in speechless admiration of her innocent trust in fallen human nature.

Some few minutes later and they stood at the rustic gate, hand locked in hand, the best of friends.

"You'll do your part, Miss Coila," said Mr. Wylie,

affectionately; "draw off Stanley from Miss Verne, and meantime I'll see what can be done for young Laurie."

In her pleasure she gave him her other hand to hold, too.

"Ah! if you will only bring him back in honor, all will be well," cooed she.

And thus they parted.

Next morning Coila was taking counsel with herself. She was alone on the beach, Maiblume not having joined her as yet.

Lovely sprite! What more enchanting vision could mere mortal see than she, as, bending over a deep, clear pool in the shadow of a monster rock, she wove bright amber ribbons of kelp among her raven tresses, fastened starry shells across her brow, and hung tassels of delicate sea-weed, green, lavender and scarlet, about her white throat!

And she sung, low and silvery, like the glad gurgle of a bird; and she poised her dainty self in this attitude and in that: and she watched her own elfin beauty in the shadowy pool with a sweet, serious attention to which self-admiration was but mere vulgar burlesque!

"Whatever befalls, my sister shall have peace!" sung the *Parisienne, recitative*. "I shall not shrink, ah, no! ah, no! I fear the poet, yet must seem to pity him—for Maiblume's sake! And should I succeed too well and win his love—alas, he is too strong for trembling me—he will force me to marry him! Bitter day for poor, poor Coila! Yet she will be strong for her sister's sake; yes, Monsieur Stanley shall be recalled in triumph; the dear papa Verne and angel Maiblume shall grieve no more; and Coila shall have done all!"

"My darling!" uttered a deep voice.

She shrieked and sprang to her feet, her summer gauzes floating wide around her like the luminous clouds about some ascending saint of the feminine gender.

Barthold Verne had stepped from behind the big black rock, his eyes filled with tears, his hands outstretched.

"What wild, loving nonsense is this you are uttering?" exclaimed he, bending over her to look earnestly into her downcast, quivering face. "I thought you saw me sitting behind the rock as you ran toward me—I was sure you had seen me, or I should not have listened. Tell me sweet child, what you said; I could not catch all the words distinctly, though I heard enough to fill my heart with deep emotion!"

Trembling and shame-faced, she cowered into his arms and hid her blushes on his shoulder; and so confused and embarrassed was she, that he had to hold her there for quite a while, soothing and caressing her, before she could find boldness to speak.

"Papa Verne!" faltered she, peeping timidly up at him, and immediately hiding her face again; "dear papa Verne, don't misjudge little Coila if she appears to seek the attention of monsieur the poet. It is that she would rid her sister of the attentions which distress her!" Here the sensitive dove quite broke down and nestled closer to the enchanted author, who folded her to his breast, scarce knowing how to express his admiration.

"This is very pretty, my darling girl, and very heroic," said he; "but I can't allow it. No, no, sweet, you must not sacrifice yourself even for Maiblume's sake."

She stopped him by a little snowflake of a hand upon his lips, by a little hug of his arm which encircled her fairy waist.

"*Cher ami*, dear, dear friend!" cooed she, "let me have my own way! I shall suffer, no—not one little pang! Bah! a bagatelle, my suffering, while Maiblume—oh, my heart! she pines, she dies! I think I can divert clever Monsieur Stanley from the pursuit without breaking up the friendship which is between you and him, if I try—very hard to be agreeable; don't you think so, too, dear papa Verne?"

Now the said papa Verne held a very strict code of

morality which precludes all pious frauds as insidious snares of the devil to capture purblind souls, but in this instance, well—she was such a little pure lily-flower, and she did look up with such infantile simplicity, generous enthusiasm shining out from those wondrous soft, swimming orbs of hers—and besides all that, mind you, she was *French*—that, really, the author was staggered and did not quite recognize the child's proposed course as that ugly path by which liars go down to the bottomless pit. What he did see was the noble spirit of self-sacrifice which inspired her, and he could no more have denied her artless plea than he could have extricated himself from her gentle thrall and thrown her into the pool.

"Do as you please, my little girl," said he, fondly smoothing back her hair, "only don't quite break poor Stanley's heart, and don't lose yours in the passage at arms."

He bent down and kissed her on the forehead, and if the kiss was more passionate than that which fathers usually bestow, his keen appreciation of the noble qualities of her mind and heart must stand for his excuse. At all events, so guileless was she, and so unconscious of her own power, that she took the kiss sedately, recognizing nothing amiss in it.

CHAPTER XII.

RECONNOITERING.

Yes, poor Maiblume was indeed pining.

Proud though she was, and quietly though she bore her pain, she could not hide the increasing transparency of her lovely cheek, nor the deep gloom of her glorious eye, nor the heart weariness and hopeless disgust of life which possessed her.

Ready with a smile, and never lacking in stately conversation when called upon, there was yet a cold somberness about her which chilled and kept at bay the advances of Paul Stanley, while it deepened the grief and distress with which her father regarded the unhappy absence of George from his customary post.

Paul Stanley, beauty worshiper from his infancy, and owning no other deity, was at this time the victim of a passion bordering on the ferocious, which had been insidiously growing and growing in his undisciplined heart, even before the tragical death of his wife. Now that every obstacle was removed, his wife in her grave, Maiblume's lover in disgraceful exile, he permitted this passion to take entire possession of him, and feeding it with his own wild imaginings, it burst forth daily and hourly in flashes of ungovernable flame, precursors of the conflagration which was destined either to consume him alone, or, if she became his to feed upon her glorious beauty for a little season, and then die out in the cold ashes of satiated passion.

Insensible she was as the Alpine glacier; cold, pure, luminous, wrapped about with the chilly mists of her own sad thoughts; and as yet, scarcely conscious of the smothered volcano at her side.

For she had given—oh, priceless gem! the true love of her unsullied heart to George. Brilliant though her lot in life had ever been, and girt about with all the splendor and fashion of the voluptuous city, she had preserved—by the side of her great-hearted father—a crystalline purity of soul, a nature rich in all womanly attributes, and an appreciation of true worth wherever it was to be found which was simply sublime in those days of dollar-worship.

While Coila was unfolding the graces of her mind to Mr. Verne upon the beach, Maiblume sat in the cottage parlor alone, her head on her hand, her sad eyes fastened upon a little vase of wild roses on the table before her, and the slow tears rolling unheeded down her cheeks.

How often had *he* whom she never more must see, brought her these simple blossoms, warm and sweet as his own pure love!

Wild roses!

She ever thought of them as his flower; she had ever worn them for his sake; as she gazed at them

now they breathed nothing but reminiscences of his faithfulness, modesty, and manly uprightness.

The cottage parlor was cool, shadowy and fragrant from the odorous zephyrs which drifted through the open casement over hay-field, plots, and honeysuckle tangles—as silvan as one could imagine for weeping nymph.

How beautiful she seemed in her drooping sadness, with her rich tresses half uncoiled and waving over her pearly arms and downcast face, her pale roseate robes flowing about her noble black satin-shod feet rested upon; with the glittering drops upon her long curved lashes and her rich violet eyes brooding over the roses!

So at least one seemed to think as he paused at the window to gloat his fire-filled eyes upon her; and as he stood, the dark blood surged into his stern cheeks, and a smile of insatiable longing curled his thin lips.

That intense gaze ere long drew up her startled eyes with its subtle magnetism; she rose hastily, exclaiming:

"Mr. Stanley!"

He entered the room and shut the door. He stood before her, tall, commanding as a Spanish cavalero, his arms folded, his gleaming eyes riveted upon her.

"You are alone?" said he, in a deep voice.

She bowed, and sunk into her chair, waving him to another.

He was something different to-day from what he had ever been; he was something to tremble before—to shrink away from.

"Miss Verne," said the deep voice, "tell me I may speak."

She gasped and half rose as if to fly, then collecting herself, drew about her that cloak of regal dignity and icy coldness under which she always felt safe, and smiling politely, remarked:

"You may certainly speak, Mr. Stanley; but pray be comic, not tragic, this morning, for I have no wish to see the pathetic side of life at present."

He drew closer; he was dead pale now and she could see him trembling.

"Maiblume," whispered he, bending toward her with imploring hands outstretched; "come to me! I need you! I love you, Maiblume, Maiblume!"

"No more!" she cried, in a thrilling voice of command, as she rose, waving him back with imperious majesty; "I shall forget that such words were ever uttered by my father's friend—words which but mock a sorrow he cannot choose but see and comprehend. No more, Mr. Stanley, I entreat—I command you!"

He waited in blank, blanched dismay until she was finished—then with one stride he was before her, kneeling at her feet, pouring forth his long pent-up passion.

She listened coldly, calmly.

"Rise, Mr. Stanley!" said she, when his impetuous eloquence had spent itself; "I have no heart to give you, and you do not want a wife who does not love you."

He rose, black with sudden rage.

"You have given your love to that miscreant, Laurie!" muttered he, grinding his teeth—"a wretch whom all good women should shrink from!"

He stopped astounded. The ice-cold glacier had shot into a blazing volcano.

Towering above him, head crested, cheeks aflame, eyes like live coals, and bosom heaving—what, was this Maiblume, the frigid?

"Miscreant in your teeth, sir," quoth she, between hers; "George Laurie is an honorable gentleman whoever belies him. You have compassed his ruin; you have sent him away from me; you have blasted his life and mine with your curse—and now you come suing my love! Sir, I have suffered your presence hitherto only because you were my father's friend—I suffer it no longer! Away! I dare not look upon you—I loathe you so!"

They gazed into each other's eyes. Such a look!

So might two tigers, oscillating to the attack, gaze into the fire-sparkling eyes of each other!

way!" reiterated she, fiercely; "do you dare insult me by remaining?" and with a grand sweep of her pearly, lace-draped arm she pointed to the

swinging low and sardonically, Paul Stanley moved and it, turned and fixed his glittering gaze upon once more.

"Madam," said he, with a smile to madden her, perceive that you are capable of that rarest of notions nowadays—a burning and passionate love. hitherto you have spent it upon an object equally unworthy and unable to comprehend it; henceforth, as a poet, with all the fire and susceptibility of a poet, claim such love as my right. Night or day I shall never rest until I subdue that proud-heart of yours, and hold you in my arms, conquered! Remember—I swear it!"

And he was gone.

She uttered a wild, tingling cry and sunk down to her knees blanched and trembling.

"Blessed God!" gasped Maiblume, "protect me from that demon!"

Stanley, in passing through the garden, observed Mr. Verne and Mademoiselle De Vouse standing at the gate, and would have turned into another path to avoid them had not the bright eyes of the little mademoiselle lit at once upon his stormy face. Alarmed lest he had been annoying her dear Maiblume, she impulsively ran up to him, and, to his astonishment, laid both her soft little hands in his, claiming hurriedly:

"Dear Monsieur Stanley, what is wrong? You look like a corpse! Is anything the matter with Maiblume? Don't let papa Verne see. Come this way and tell me all first."

He obeyed her, simply because he would not for the world have had his friend's inquiring eyes read his own devil-possessed eyes at that moment; as for the little girl, he scarcely noticed her presence as he strode grimly under the overarching foliage.

"Monsieur Stanley," said a tremulous voice presently, "I read sorrow, I read anguish in your looks. I see it all! She has trampled upon your love."

The thrilling sweetness of her lowered tones forced him to look down at her.

Two glistening rills were running down her sea-shell-tinted cheeks from eyes as soft as the pools of Heshbon; two snowy hands were clasped in generous distress!

He looked closer.

Her coral lips were quivering; her downy cheeks were flushing; her pretty breast was heaving convulsively.

The sprite! She was crying for his sake.

"Mademoiselle," said he, in a peculiarly metallic voice, "my sorrows won't kill me. Spare your grief; you are far too pretty to cry over any love trouble but your own."

She lifted her shy, sweet eyes to his with a solemn awe in their depths.

"Oh, you are the brave man!" ejaculated she, clasping her hands; "the strong soul! With what endurance—with what fortitude—with what heroism you front these successive storms of misfortune! You are like a god; I, poor, foolish trifle, might well worship you."

His attention was now riveted upon the inspired speaker.

Never in her life had Mademoiselle De Vouse been better worth looking at. In her enthusiasm she had quite forgotten her usual fawn-like timidity; had quite forgotten the misconstruction he might put upon her impulsive words, and glowed before him as a *piccola* Venus endowed with Sappho's burning spirit.

Paul Stanley stopped under the overarching foliage to offer her his hand with a gloomy sort of friendliness.

"Thank you for your good opinion," said he, "and for your sympathy," he added, with an enthusiastic grit of the teeth and glint of the eye. "Don't

let Miss Verne turn you against me, and—and—be my advocate—won't you?"

Having let him take her hand, she bent, pressed her velvet lips upon it and dropped a tear upon it, whispering:

"Ah, yes! I shall do any thing—any thing for monsieur." With which assurance she flitted away, and Stanley looked after her almost with curiosity.

"Incomprehensible little thing!" muttered he, as he turned off; "I always thought she disliked me, but now, by all the gods, I think she's half in love with me!"

A few days afterward, Mr. Wylie, who was a most devoted *attache* to the ladies at Stormcliff cottage, maneuvered for another *tele-a-tele* with Coila.

Now, that gentle fair had fought quite shy of Mr. Wylie ever since that walk on the cliffs, and it required a good deal of engineering to carry his point. However, after beating about the bush with some of the diplomatic talent of a Wolsey, he caught her one morning sitting on the doorstep, with her lap full of dewy-red clover with which she was feeding her own glossy black pony, as miniature an edition of the equine species as she was of the human race.

Seating himself close beside her, said Mr. Wylie:

"I say, you know this ain't business. We'll have to get the secretary back. Stanley don't bite, and Miss Verne is getting sick over it."

She threw back her bird-like head and warbled a laugh.

"Monsieur the poet does not give me a chance," said she; "he is injured—he is sullen; he hides at home. Wait till monsieur comes forth again to the attack and you shall see."

"And, meantime," said Wylie, rolling his eyeballs into the corner next to her, "suppose you take Laurie's matter in hand yourself. I'm too bungling; I can't meddle, and besides, I've done all I could."

"Eh? What has monsieur done?" carelessly inquired little mademoiselle, while she kissed the black velvet nose of Hadji.

"I've found out where he lives," returned the artist, chuckling.

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried Coila, brimming with lively curiosity. "And where does he live? And why does he live there?"

"I can tell you where he lives, but *why* you'll have to find out for yourself. If he was to catch me interfering I'd get into the darnedest row—you understand; whereas, if you poked your nice little finger into his pie he would be only too grateful to you for taking such an interest in him. A petticoat makes all the difference in the world," added he, philosophically.

"Monsieur has a long head; monsieur schemes well," said Coila, looking at him earnestly, while he eyed the drifting summer clouds. "I wonder why monsieur takes such an interest in all our fortunes."

"Nothing else to do," drawled he, politely suppressing a yawn, "and being a benevolent sort of a fellow, I like to see nice people happy."

She set her glittering teeth and shrugged her shoulders.

"All well!" said she, airily; "only continue to act the good geni. Now tell me all about this hiding-place of Monsieur Laurie's."

So then he invited her out to ride with him, and off they cantered to Linsdale, the little town once before mentioned, and having lunched there, they spent the afternoon in scaling the mountain, reconnoitering the premises where George and Aubrey lay concealed, and in returning home quite wearied out, but perfectly confidential toward each other.

"Now attend to this business according to your lights," said Mr. Wylie, "and I miss my guess if you don't bring him home in triumph before the week is out. Holy poker! won't the Vernes be ready to worship you, though."

"Trust to me, dear friend," said Coila, radiantly; "Monsieur George's little secret shall be shared with me immediately. His conduct shall be discovered to be irreproachable; he shall be reinstated; Maiblume shall reward him for his sorrows with her hand—and *voilà!* sunshine, felicity!"

CHAPTER XIII.

WHO ARE YOU? SPEAK!

On these long, sunny, listless September days in the heart of the cedar forest! Oh, the anguish of longing, the infinite gradations of passionate pain! Oh, the pale, short gleams of resignation—of Heaven's approving smile, which beamed athwart the cold gloom of this weary winter of the heart!

George and Aubrey sat side by side in the cool, dim chamber in the ruined *chalet*.

The casement was thrown wide without fear now, and the invalid's chair was drawn close to it.

George had been reading to Aubrey—a letter from his mother, a letter which tenderly welcomed the friendless waif to her fireside, never to leave it until he had found another home which he could love better.

Aubrey sat quiet, thinking.

"Dear boy, cheer up; you shall be very happy among the lovely flowers of Florida," said George, tenderly, thinking that Aubrey's heart sunk at the prospect of a home among strangers.

The boy's whole face quivered; large tears rolled from under his closed eyes, but he did not speak.

"Oh, come! come! this will never do," said George, cheerfully; "you have only to see my mother, and you can't help feeling at home with her. You can't help loving *her*, Aubrey; when you see her."

A sob escaped the boy; he covered his face with his hands, while a sudden storm of emotion convulsed and shook his attenuated frame.

In a moment George, faithful and tender, was beside him, his kind hands caressing him.

Suddenly Aubrey flung his hands away and writhed from him with a low, bitter cry.

"Go away," said he, "you torture me."

George drew back, cut to the heart.

"I don't wish to torture you, my poor boy," said he. "I want to comfort you."

Aubrey writhed again as if these words stung him anew.

"Why are you so kind to me?" cried he, fixing his blazing eyes upon that sad yet patient face.

"What would you have me do?" answered George; "you have no home; you can't work; you are ill; what in Heaven's name would you have me do? I can't let you starve."

"What business is it of yours?" said Aubrey. "All the rest of the world is willing to have me starve, why are not you?"

George said nothing.

"Don't, don't look at me so!" exclaimed Aubrey.

"Always the same pitying look! Oh, you are either an angel or the worst hypocrite that ever lied!"

"Ah, child," sighed George, "when you know me better you will trust me more, and when you see my mother, you will be sorry you ever doubted me."

"Yes, your mother," said Aubrey, with a fresh burst of tears, "you have a beautiful mother—and so had I once. Where is she now? Oh, *she* was an angel, Mr. Laurie, and I loved her so. She had yellow hair like mine, and eyes like a bit of Heaven, and when she kissed me with trembling, hot lips, and called me her own darling boy, I used to forget that I was only a poor, sickly cripple, shut up in an asylum, and I knew what it was to be happy."

He wept so violently that George once more attempted to soothe him, but Aubrey took no heed of him till his passion was spent, when, lying back, faint and exhausted, with his nerveless hands still in George's tender clasp, he seemed to sleep.

The soft wind whispered among the crisp foliage outside, and the red sunset peeped through the gray tree-trunks under the motionless cedar

branches like the glare of some far-off conflagration.

The red light lit those silent faces with an unearthly beauty—the sleeping boy's and his watching protector's.

Sud'ly the lovely eyes of Aubrey flew wide; he looked round him with a little shiver, then long, and with passionate earnestness, into George's. A thrill seemed to pass through his whole frame; he snatched his hands from George's, and with a faint cry wound his arms round his neck and strained him close, pressing his burning cheek against his.

"My dear Aubrey," faltered George—and could say no more.

"Oh, you kind, good man!" said Aubrey, choked with sobs, "I can't hold out against you any more. I do believe in you; I do love you, and if I could only have the hope of dying with your arms round me, would be almost glad to go!"

"My dear, dear Aubrey!" repeated George, tenderly smoothing back his tangled curls.

Aubrey put up his thin hand and felt George's face.

"You are crying?" said he, with a laugh, half-glad, half-anguished; "you are crying over poor, ungrateful, unthankful Aubrey. Oh, how good God must be to be able to fashion such a heart as yours! How can you care for me? Why don't you hate me and leave me to perish, as I deserve? Instead, you treat me like a brother; you are never weary of showing me kindness."

George could not answer except by caresses.

"Ah! you think I am such a child, and such a selfish and wicked one that I have been quite blind to all you have suffered for my sake," continued Aubrey, with the same fervid earnestness. "I'm not so blind, though, but that I can guess that in staying here to nurse me you have lost your situation. I'm not so stupid but that I can see that you're not a rich man; that you give most of your money to support your mother, and that you save everything off yourself to buy these expensive comforts for me. At first in my disappointment at being shut up here instead of being allowed to find the lady who visited me at the Home, I was base enough to suspect you all the time—to think that you knew who my father and mother were, and were keeping me hidden until they would offer you a large enough reward to restore me. But now—oh! my true-hearted, generous benefactor, I believe in you—I love you—I would lay down my life to serve you!"

"You make me happy, very happy and grateful to God by these words!" said George, tremulously. "Life can never seem so bleak and hopeless again, nor duty so hard to perform. God bless you, my boy, and give you many happy years, for I need your love, Aubrey, having lost *her* love who used to light my life-path like a star."

Fifteen minutes later Aubrey sat alone immersed in thought. The window was closed now, and the curtain carefully drawn; the lamp stood ready to be lit on the little table by his side with his books, flowers, and a basket of grapes to cool his fevered mouth—all set in their places by George before he went down to Linsdale to see what letters the mail might have brought him.

At last, after musing deeply for some time, he exclaimed, half-aloud:

"I must do something to help him! I dare not be a burden to him any longer!"

A soft rustle behind him startled him; he turned his head to see the strangest vision in that lonely hiding-place!

A tiny woman stood just inside the door, clad from milk-white throat to the fairy feet—which were so outly shod moreover—in a heavy dark-blue dress, her head and face being thickly shrouded with black lace, which quite concealed her features; but her eyes—oh, they shone like stars through the folds!

Aubrey half-rose in his astonishment and fright,

and opened his mouth to scream, but she held up the minutest of gloved hands with a quick, imperious gesture, hissing out:

"Hush! You are safe, *mon enfant*. I am George Laurie's friend."

Aubrey sunk back gazing at her in mute surprise. He could see her distinctly as she rapidly unwound the long scarf from about her jaunty little hat and exposed the loveliest, gentlest, most girlish face imaginable.

"*Mon garçon!*" murmured she, in a tender voice, as, throwing the scarf over her aim, she came close up to him. "I am enraptured to have heard what you said as I stood at the door looking at you. You would help Monsieur George, your noble benefactor, who has lost situation and lady-love for your sake? Good. I have come to tell you how to help him. Come, let me see your face, and tell me your history."

She turned at these words, drew aside the curtain, and stepped aside from between Aubrey and the light, looking upon him.

He, watching all her movements in agitated silence, saw a sudden wild astonishment sweep across her dainty visage—a sudden glare shoot from her soft eyes, a ghastly pallor steal all the rich roses from her ripe cheeks!

Next instant she swooped upon him, a tigress, with cruel hands gripping his shoulders till the little ladylike gloves split audibly.

"Who are you?" panted the terrible creature, shaking him fiercely; "speak, or I shall strike you! Your name—your name!"

"Aubrey Armand!" gasped the boy.

Oh, what a shriek! Only one thought: then she lay on the floor at his feet in a deathlike swoon.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CAT SHOWS HER CLAWS.

PARALYZED with horror the boy remained in his chair, gazing at her with eyes staring in their sockets, for he thought that she had fallen down dead.

He scarcely breathed or moved a muscle until, after what seemed to him an hour of dead silence, though in reality it was not more than a few minutes, she stirred and moaned. A few moments more and she opened her eyes, and seeing the terrified child bending over her, uttered an inarticulate cry, staggered to her feet and flung herself into a chair.

"Oh, lady, what is the matter?" stammered Aubrey. "Do you know who I am? For if you do, pray—pray tell me whose child I am!"

She burst into a torrent of French, gesticulating like a madwoman; then, dissolving into tears, faltered:

"*Grace de Dieu!* there is nothing but ruin; nothing but ruin!"

She soon dashed away her tears with an impetuous hand, and, dragging her chair forward till she was in arm's length of him, she looked him all over with a devouring attention.

"Boy," she said, abruptly, "where have you been all your life?"

He recoiled, frightened at her fierce bright eyes and savage manner. She clinched her hands.

"You must tell me, you *shall* tell me," cried she, with a little furious growl like a snarling cat. "Speak out and speak to the point!"

"I can't tell you anything," murmured he; "wait till Mr. Laurie comes."

She started from her chair with a perfect scream of anger and surprise, and seizing the unhappy child, shook him till she was out of breath.

"You will be dumb, will you?" cried she, shrilly. "Take care, my little beggar, that you don't drive me too far! Come now! Speak! Speak, I say!"

Pale as death and gasping painfully, the boy looked up in the convulsed, furious face of the little lady, saying between his gasps:

"I love Mr. Laurie and I will never disobey him. You are no friend of his or you could not treat me so, when he is so kind to me."

"All well, little vagrant!" exclaimed she, with a hiss like an angry serpent. "You defy me, do you? Very good! I shall give you time to observe who is to be master in this struggle." She stopped suddenly, apparently struck speechless by the look of indomitable resolution she met in the cripple's flashing eye; then she retreated to the window, stood there like a stone for a few minutes, lost in reflection.

"Aubrey Armand," said she at length, with an abrupt change of manner, "I am sorry for my *brusquerie*; you are a child, yes, but you can understand the thing when it is explained to you. You love Monsieur Laurie, you say?"

"Yes," said Aubrey, faintly.

"So do I love Monsieur George!" cried the little lady, enthusiastically. "I love him so well that I came here to find out the cause of his great trouble and recent misfortunes. I see it in *you*—you are the cause of all."

Then, approaching him with rapid step and hurried manner, she added:

"There is only one thing you can do now to save him from utter ruin. Fly from him this very hour!"

"No! No!" shuddered Aubrey. "Anything but that."

"You want to see him prosperous and happy again, don't you?" said she, in softer accents.

"I do! God knows I do!" said Aubrey, weeping.

"Then you must bear the separation for a little time; you must be his brave Aubrey—willing to sacrifice yourself for him. When you meet again, ah! the happy reunion! the joy, the pride with which he will fold you to his happy heart!"

She clasped her hands and looked heavenward, with an enthusiasm fit to inspire a stone.

"If I only understood it all," faltered Aubrey, gazing at the strange creature, "I would do anything you say, even if it cost me my life."

"You would?" cried she, with animation. "Now, indeed, you begin to retrieve the error you make in living at all. You wish to understand? Come, then, I will tell you. Because Monsieur Laurie has chosen to succor you, his employer has thrust him forth in scorn and anger. As soon as you leave Monsieur Laurie, he will be received again by his employer; and the lady whom he loves will marry him. There—that is all I know of the matter."

Aubrey wiped away his tears and with trembling haste reached for his crutches.

"I am ready to go," said he, getting up dizzily, and walking unsteadily across the floor. "But how can I get down from the top of this mountain?"

"How did you get up?" inquired she, returning from the closet with some wraps in her arms.

"Mr. Laurie carried me," said Aubrey, with a gush of tears. "Oh, my dear Mr. Laurie! Am I to go without seeing you again?"

"Courage, little one!" said she, kneeling down to wrap him up and kissing his forehead lightly as she rose; "you shall not regret this sacrifice—my word upon that. Fear nothing; you shall get down as you came up; I have one with me who is able to carry a light weight like you."

She put her arm around him and assisted him from the house; and so with bursting heart, but full of grateful devotion, he fled.

Behind a screen of clambering vines they came upon a stout villager—a woman of masculine appearance and of undoubted toughness of muscle. Into her arms the beautiful little lady placed Aubrey, and they were about to plunge into the recesses of the forest when she uttered a sharp exclamation.

"*Misère!*" cried she; "I have to go back; I have forgotten my veil. Wait here for me," and she skimmed back to the house.

In ten minutes she returned, and they clambered through the gloomy woods in breathless haste, fearing lest night should overtake them, besides which the wind was rising and a storm was brewing.

All at once Aubrey uttered a scream,

They were crossing an open space, and casting his eyes upward to the summit of the mountain, he saw a thick cloud of smoke mingled with fire ascending.

"The house is burning down! Look! Look! Oh, what will Mr. Laurie say? What will Mr. Laurie think? Let us go back!" cried he, breathlessly.

The little lady and her attendant both uttered a shower of horrified interjections.

"*Mon Dieu*, how terrible!" said the little lady. "But do not distress thyself, my little one; it is better that Monsieur Laurie should think thee dead than false and ungrateful."

"No, no, no! Take me back! Take me back!" cried Aubrey, struggling wildly in the strong grasp of the feminine Samson.

"Be quiet!" hissed the little lady, fiercely; "the woods ring with your voice! Do I not say that it is well that Monsieur Laurie should believe you dead?"

Aubrey cowered under the flash of her eyes and the menace of her upraised hand, but replied firmly:

"Lady, you say you wish to serve Mr. Laurie, but he would not thank you for this service. I know him better than you; I know that if he thought that I had been burned to death up there he would never get over it. You must please let me go back—you must indeed!"

"A—h!" cried she, shaking with anger once more; "Rebellious! Woman, muffle his head; we have no time to argue with him."

Aubrey fought against this barbarity with all his little strength, filling the echoing glades with his shrill cries, but all was in vain.

A few moments the struggle lasted—then he lay limp and senseless across the woman's brawny shoulder, and so was borne through the Linsdale streets to an obscure quarter and swallowed up in a filthy tenement just as the town clock struck eight and the first big, warm drops of the summer storm were falling.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TRAGEDY OF THE WAVES.

An hour afterward Mademoiselle De Vouse entered the cottage parlor, where Mr. Verne and his daughter were entertaining a visitor, Mr. Wylie. She wore a gray cobweb of a dress; her hair was smoothly banded about her small, trim head; she looked as demure as a little gray mouse, and just as harmless and timid.

"Dear Coila, are you better? I am so glad you are able to come down," said Maiblume, affectionately.

"I am—ah, quite recovered—convalescent," said Coila, with a feeble little chirp, as she languidly approached her guest, who sat staring at her with round, unblinking eyes.

The wind was tearing round the house and the rain was beating against the windows; one had to speak pretty loud to be heard in the din.

"You look well enough," said Mr. Wylie, in her ear, as she sunk into a chair beside him; "your cheeks are like fire."

"I have a headache, the wind is so high," said Coila.

"You were out in it, then. Miss Coila, were you?"

"Out? Oh, *mon Dieu*, no! I have been lying in a darkened room all the afternoon. Whenever a storm is brewing I have this malady of the head."

"How bright your eyes are. Miss Coila!—looks as if you had been up to some devilment, eh?"

"Monsieur Wylie laughs at me! Are they bright? They were dull enough when I looked at them a minute since. It must be that the pleasure of seeing you has kindled their brightness."

"Oh, come, now! Compliments ain't in my line; I never get 'em except when I'm to be hoodwinked. Glory! your hair's dripping wet!"

"Wet? Yes, monsieur is right. I've been bathing my head with cold water. But, adieu; this wind makes me nervous and I must return to my room,"

"Stop a minute, Miss Coila; how about the Laurie business? Found out his secret yet?"

"Not yet, monsieur; I go to-morrow, should the storm blow over." And with murmured apologies mademoiselle withdrew, considerably paler than when she had entered.

The wind rose higher and higher; the rain splashed in whole sheets upon the shattered foliage all around; the roar of the trees and the boom of the distant sea swelled the loud tumult hour by hour.

Mr. Verne would not hear of Mr. Wylie braving the tempest, and so he stayed all night at the cottage trying vainly, in common with its other inmates, to find repose.

About daylight the rain ceased, the wind dropped dead, and when the sun rose the sky was unclouded.

An hour afterward Coila, slumbering like a child in her virginal nest, was roused by Maiblume standing by her side, partially dressed.

"*Eh bien?* My sister! What is it?" queried she, nestling down on her pillows again.

"Listen!" whispered Maiblume, turning her pale, awed face toward the window, all draped with green leaves, all glistened over with diamond drops.

The deep-mouthed roar of a cannon close at hand wrung a scream of terror from Coila.

"What is it, then, *ma sœur*? Whence comes the cannonade?" she cried, huddling on her clothes in trembling haste.

"A steamer has been wrecked on the bar," answered Maiblume; "she is signaling for help."

At that moment Maiblume's maid entered, terror-stricken.

"Oh, Miss Verne," said she, bursting into tears, "master has gone down to the beach to try and save some of the poor folks off the wreck, and the sea is like a boiling pot. I can see the big waves rolling in from the door."

"My father!" faltered Maiblume, petrified with horror. "Oh, I must go with him." And she darted from the room to throw on the remainder of her wardrobe.

Coila sat on the edge of her bed looking at her rosy feet, as they peeped from under the hem of what she would have termed her *robe de nuit*.

Kate, the maid, waited, naturally expecting that the tender young lady would faint and require her assistance, but Coila shocked her not a little by raising a pair of very hard, bright eyes and demanding in a very hard, unemotional voice:

"Did Monsieur Verne go alone? Was Monsieur Wylie not with him?"

"Oh, yes, he went with him," said the girl, agape.

"There is in effect, then, every prospect of his being drowned also," returned Coila, with the same blood-curdling composure.

"Come, my girl, help me to dress, quick! quick! I must accompany mademoiselle, my sister."

A few minutes after, the two young ladies were running down the rain-drenched lane, all strewn with broken branches, tattered leaves, and shreds of sea-weed, borne by the mighty wind almost up to their very door.

It was a strange sight in that hushed and sunny morning hour, when they came upon the sea running in, billow towering above billow, like foaming coursers bent upon dashing themselves to pieces against the grim and jagged crags, half-way up which they leaped in impotent fury! It was a strange sight to see the village people, part standing with gaze riveted upon the wreck, part running about, sometimes waist-deep into the water. It was a strange sight to look across that seething caldron with its great, green abysses, its toppling, cumbrous white breakers, and its acres of bubbling foam, to the doomed steamer which was, by this time, almost submerged, so that its cannon was dumb at last, and the crashing of its timbers against the adamant wall was the only signal of distress which now could be heard!

As Maiblume and Coila reached the little grassy plateau overlooking the beach, which was now the

field of battle for the advancing and retiring hosts of waves, they saw Mr. Verne and Mr. Wylie surrounded by a group of fishermen up to their waists in water, watching anxiously the return of a boat which was buffeting its way back from the wreck. In this boat cowered half a dozen of poor souls, rescued from their sinking home by the brave men of Stormcliff.

The struggle seemed to be a terrible one, for the little boat was tossed like an egg-shell from the apex of the crested billow into the deep, green trough in which it wobbled about, as if the tremendous pull of the waters rendered her unmanageable by either oar or tiller, while the fast-crowding giants behind threatened to overwhelm her every instant.

As, in common with all the rest, the ladies looked on in breathless suspense, some one stepped beside them and stood gazing, not at the scene, but at them.

Coila never turned her head, but Maiblume, looking up, beheld—oh, woeful vision!—the sadly altered face of George Laurie; Disheveled, without hat, his hair clotted upon his brow, haggard and hollow-eyed, he stood before her, holding out his hands.

She uttered a cry to break one's heart, and gave him her hands, forgetting all.

"George," wailed she, clinging to him, "you are very ill! How terrible you look!"

"I am overwhelmed with trouble," said he, his faint voice almost lost in the boisterous noise of the ocean; "I scarcely know how to endure all this misfortune."

Coila, who had been intently watching Mr. Wylie, turned to see who spoke, and sprung forward with an eager cry of welcome.

"Oh, Monsieur George! you have come back to us again! Now Maiblume will weep no more; now monsieur my papa Verne will be happy—"

"Oh, be quiet!" faltered Maiblume, weeping bitterly, and snatching her hands from George's to wring them. "As long as George persists in lying under the imputations of Mr. Stanley, he knows that he must give us up."

"My angel," cried Coila, embracing her fervently, "do you plead with him to tell all; he cannot resist *you*. Monsieur George, spare her this misery; see, she loves—she dies for you."

"Maiblume," said George, hoarsely, "I have to choose between you and honor; which is it to be?" She raised her mournful eyes to his; they slowly kindled 'neath her noble thought:

"Choose *honor*!" said she, "and I will mourn no more. To know that you are worthy a true woman's love is sweetness enough for a true woman's life!"

Coila uttered a savage cry which was broken in the midst, however, by a long brown hand on her arm, and Mr. Wylie's spray-wet face, eager and excited, was looking into hers.

"This is no place for you!" said he, almost roughly; "what are you doing here?"

She gazed with keen alarm at him.

"But, monsieur, why not?" remonstrated she. "Who is ice enough to seclude one's self when lives are in danger?"

"You can do no good here; go home!" said Wylie, with a rough decision that perfectly astounded her.

She looked round for Maiblume, but she and George were walking rapidly away toward Mr. Verne, and the green plateau was only occupied by herself and the artist.

"What are you going to do? Why may I not stay?" demanded she, with a little backbone of rebellion running through her baby accents.

"You don't want to see a lot of half-drowned people, do you? Come, be sensible! Run away. I'll describe it all; upon my word I will—first time I see you."

She looked at him strangely; he could have sworn that green sparks flashed from her eyes.

"Monsieur is not responsible," said she. "Mon-

sieur is insolent"—the words died upon her lips, for a sudden wailing cry went up from the throng around them, and darting an anxious glance seaward, they saw a seething waste where the boat had been, and a few black dots floating about.

A fierce oath burst from Nowell Wylie, mingling with the girl's screams of dismay.

"Drowned at the very door!" groaned Wylie, and off he darted, and in an instant was fighting his way through the water, in the futile hope of reaching some of the struggling figures.

Barthold Verne and George Laurie were before him, in swimming manfully out against the tide. They had tied ropes around their waists, which men on the beach held, paying them out as they wanted length; they were both powerful swimmers, and, as they struck across the great gray plains and shot like water-birds through the towering ridges, a blow of which would have struck them dead, the villagers cheered and waved their caps as if they were mad, while Maiblume on her knees among the cast-up rubble, watched and prayed.

Mr. Verne and George reached the place where the boat had gone down almost simultaneously, and each grasped one of the struggling figures and began to fight his way back again. Of the rest the wild waves made short work; one by one they went down, beaten senseless by tons of falling water, and were drifted in, some to be frightfully mangled by the grinding rocks, some more gently carried to the sand-beach and laid within reach of the awe-struck villagers' ready hands.

Coila began to watch, with awakening attention, one of these lifeless forms.

Stride by stride the livid waters carried in the inert body, and laid it at last at the feet of Coila De Vouse.

She recoiled with a gasp of horror, then catching a glimpse of the blue, bloodless face through its long black hair, she darted forward, bent over it with a long, fearful gaze, and broke into a faint, shuddering wail:

"Oh, my heart!" exclaimed the Frenchwoman. "It is Emile Armand!"

"Yes!" shouted the hoarse voice of the panting Wylie, at her elbow; "you *would* stay, you know! And now, how do you like it?"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE POET'S NEW LOVE.

HE was wet and dripping as any sea-monster, and he glared at the fair lady with anything but admiration.

She flung up her arms in a paroxysm of despair.

"He knows all—oh, the perfidious!" shuddered she, in her own tongue.

"You bet your head on that!" retorted he, in good round English. "I know that this fellow here is the last man *you* want to see."

"Traitor!" hissed she, between her teeth, as she turned upon him like a fury. "You've acted spy, have you? The honorable office! I compliment monsieur upon it and upon his aptitude for it, and for no others!" and she made him a mock courtesy.

"You she-demon!" said he. "Do you actually scorn and flout beside a corpse?"

She looked down at the body with a sudden hope, and for a moment or two seemed absorbed in her scrutiny of it.

"Dead!" said she, looking up at Wylie with bright, bold eyes. "Then, monsieur, I have nothing to fear."

Mr. Wylie regarded her with a species of fearful admiration.

At that moment the body moved, and Coila's triumph faded.

She again became frightfully pale and began to gasp in unutterable consternation. It was now Mr. Wylie's turn.

"You precious conspirator!" said he, "I think your cake's pretty well-nigh dough, by this time. That fellow's good for twenty years yet. Bless you!

he was only stunned! Look at the color coming back to his lips—he's going to open his eyes in a minute, and see you—and then—hey-day!"

She made one spring toward flight, but was caught with great adroitness by her artist friend.

"Don't, now, I beg of you—you'll run yourself all out of breath," said he, gallantly, "and then you won't be able to tell the right of this story."

She struggled and tore like a young cat, but he held her firmly.

"Take care, miss!" drawled he. "It won't be comfortable for you to make a clean breast of it before all these people—you'd better make terms with me."

She stopped struggling to get away, and clung to his arm instead.

"Terms?" whispered she; "then you don't want to ruin me?"

"No, I don't; I only want some folks to get their own," said Mr. Wylie, keeping one eye on her and the other on Emile Armand. "I'll do a pretty good thing for you if you'll just answer me straight one *well*-question. I'll keep this here fellow out of the way till you have time to clear, if you'll tell me where you put Mrs. Stanley's will after you stole it out of her desk?"

She reeled, and would have fallen but for his supporting arm.

"What proofs has monsieur?" asked she, huskily.

"Never you worry about them," said he.

"You will let me save myself?" shivered Coila, clinging wildly to him.

"All right, only go ahead," quoth her friend.

She put her trembling hand up to her brow, and strove to collect her thoughts. She was successful, and soon looked up, with a lurking *diablesse*, though she spoke with tragic earnestness.

"I have a little confession to make, Monsieur Wylie," said she; "I make it brief because I am imperiled. I come to Madame Stanley—she is gentle, kind; I love her. She dies one night, and in her death-throes she tells me that she has a secret which she has never dared to reveal to monsieur, her husband. She also tells me that she has made a will—and its contents. She prays me to tell this secret to monsieur, her husband, and to see that the will is fulfilled. I reflect; I grow troubled; I cannot publish this thing; I cannot injure my madame's reputation even at her bidding—I risk all; I hide the will, and lock the secret in my foolish breast."

"The will! the will! Where is it?" burst forth Wylie, savagely.

"In madame's coffin!" whispered Coila.

Presto! Change! A dazzling scene!

A suit of drawing-rooms flooded with gas-light; sumptuous carpets, of Turkish splendor, under foot; satin and lace draping the lofty walls, and a soft crush of richly dressed men and women pacing to and fro! The plash of silvery fountains, the breath of tropical flowers, the gentle waving of perfumed fans above which glittered eyes as bright as the gems which adorned the owners; the soft hum of voices, the ripple of ladies' laughter, and the distant ebb and swell of some grand organ far away, what the melody is to the drama, reproducing in music language the spirit of the romance!

A great prima donna is receiving her friends to-night, at her beautiful house in Lexington avenue, and many of the notables whom we met at Barthold Verne's mansion, just eight months ago, only too proud to see the glorious singer without the barrier of the footlights between them.

Among these, behold our friends, the author the poet, the Lily of the Valley, whiter and purer than ever, and the airy fairy *Parisienne*.

Well-a-day, that hearts are cold and men must sue in vain! Although in the exigencies of society, Maiblume's hand rests, as when we first saw her, upon Mr. Stanley's arm, only frigid words pass between the two, and Love stands aloof with folded wings, shivering in the chilly atmosphere.

Yet, thanks be to Heaven for the eternal law of compensation!

Coila, skimming by Mr. Verne's side as when first we saw her, beams warm as Aurora, and the man basks in the glow!

And now, why, has Coila neglected Mr. Wylie's warning? Why is she here still, among her friends?

Stay, then, we shall explain. Like the storm of that dread morning, the evil shadows seem to have fled, and the scene is changed from gloom to glitter.

Mr. Wylie has been persuaded to grant Mademoiselle De Vouse one week of grace, before he hunts her from her home by certain disclosures which he has proved to her he can make.

Shocked by the frightful sights she witnessed on the beach, this tender birdling of the Verne nest has begged her benefactors to take her back to New York so earnestly that they have obediently folded their tents and left Stormcliff, with only a day's notice to the domestic force at home.

Coila has faithfully promised Nowell Wylie that, at the end of the week dedicated to unspoken adieu to the friends she adores, she will disappear from their lives—never more to be seen or heard of. What does she here?

Follow her closely.

Barthold Verne and his fairy companion paced in the bright train through the spacious salons of Signora Carissima Del Ciel, and murmurs of admiration followed the distinguished genius and his radiant charge. Anon they drifted into the signora's fine conservatory, but unlike the rest, they did not drift out again; for Coila stopped to bury her face in a bank of English pansies, and looking up from them with tears glittering in her eyes, cried faintly:

"*He las! mon ami*—dear friend, if I should leave thee—should die—wouldst thou think of thy poor Coila tenderly?"

"Dear girl!" exclaimed Mr. Verne, quite startled: "what should make you think of death? You, my bright Bird of Paradise!"

He led her to a velvet seat and took his place beside her. She shook away her tears, laughing.

"Ah, monsieur, I am blue—dispirited. It is that you and my sister are unhappy, and me, I have no power to force Fortune to smile on you. If monsieur grieves, Coila can but pine. My heart, it aches!"

Pressing her fairy hands upon her side she lifted her large, liquid eyes filled with pain to his.

So then what else could the admiring dealer in the emotions do than enact a little bit out of his last love story—snatch the fairy hands from the aching heart of this ingenuous birdling who had crept into his home, kiss them, and bless her for her dear love and tender sympathy, and at last:

"Darling! love me! marry me!" whispered Barthold Verne.

Oh, the wild glint of her eye! Oh, the strange smile on her crimson lip!

She hid both upon his shoulder—she trembled, she sobbed, she prayed to him to be kind and give her time to understand this wonderful thing which he had said—to give her till to-morrow evening!

"I am an old man to you, my little girl," said he, sadly, "but I can love you as faithfully as the youngest. Take time to think over it, Coila, and if your heart says no, don't fear to tell me; I can better bear to live without you than to see you wear your life out in discontent."

She blessed him with her tearful eyes, and they re-entered the drawing-room.

A few minutes after, Mademoiselle De Vouse, nestling under the wing of one of the wealthiest dowagers in New York, observed Mr. Stanley and Maiblume enter from the picture-gallery, both unnaturally pale and with a smothered fire in their averted looks. There was deep silence through all the saloons, for the prima donna had taken her silver-stringed harp, and, sitting down in their midst, was about to ravish their ears with one of her celebrated madrigals.

As Maiblume, observing Coila, walked down the long room to join her, the gloomy poet by her side, every eye in the room was upon them.

Stanley felt the significant stir, and his heart grew black and bitter. Maiblume's latest icy repulse still rung in his ears; her stately glance of indignation and aversion still sent the blood tingling in hot shame through his veins—he looked like a demon as he handed her, with a respectful obeisance, to her place beside Coila.

"Stay!" whispered the latter, as he was turning away. "Why do you forsake us, you cold man?"

He met her eyes, large and pitiful, glistening, too, with unshed tears.

"What a fool I am!" thought Stanley. "She is more beautiful than Maiblume! I'll show these people that I'm not always spurned in woman's scorn."

He passed to the back of Coila's chair, and bending over her, whispered a gallantry which again drew her innocent-seeming eyes up to his.

At that moment, the darling of the heavens began to sing.

Oh! voice of tremulous, melting tenderness, all velvet, all sweetness, all matchless, incomparable melody! No earthly taint there, no human crack or effort; naught but pure heaven—tones rising and falling in smooth perfection!

The words, too—what soft and pleading passion throbbed in every lingering syllable! what heart-yearnings—what subtle gradations from love to pain—from pain to blank life—weariness!

The piercing gaze of the poet was riveted the while upon the upraised eyes of Coila De Vouse; they darkened and pulsed, waxed dewy tender or blackly desperate with the mood of the madrigal.

"She loves me!" thought the disappointed suitor, in sudden fierce exultation.

He bent lower.

"Miss De Vouse," whispered he; "you were made for me; come, I must speak or die!"

The song was finished, the soft applauding of gloved hands was sounding in every direction as Mr. Stanley and mademoiselle passed into the deserted picture-gallery.

A few minutes, and a jeweled head lay upon a manly breast, two ruby lips were brushed by a long silken mustache.

Then a faint cry, and a tragedy queen in miniature standing before the poet.

"Ah, my friend, what madness!" aspirated Coila. "Monsieur my father—I would say Monsieur Verne—has already asked me to be his wife!"

"Confusion!" hissed Stanley, growing greedier the instant his prize seemed about to be wrested from him. "And your answer?"

"What can I say?" moaned the afflicted beauty, wringing her hands in the most pathetic manner. "I owe all to Monsieur Verne—so kind, so protecting! I have asked time to consider—but, *misere!* I must say yes, for I am grateful!"

"But you shall not sacrifice yourself so, my angel!" vowed the suitor; "I have won your love, and no other man shall win your hand. Come, dear, let me call you my affianced wife!"

"I dare not!" shivered Coila, retreating into a moon-lit embrasure where she looked far more beautiful than before. "I must accept and marry Monsieur Verne—" (a heart-rending sob here choked her) "or I must leave his house."

"I see," said Stanley, following her up with ardor. "He has put you in such a position that you must either marry him or leave his house. You shall leave his house to-morrow for mine. We shall be quietly married in the morning."

"But—but—Ah, monsieur!" gasped the lady, in such agitation that he was obliged to support her.

"But me no buts!" cried he, triumphantly.

She melted with a glad murmur, and nestled on his breast, his own fair bride-elect.

"Madam," said a stony voice that made them

start apart like a thunder-clap, "Mr. Wylie desires you to return to Mr. Verne's house instantly;—you, too, Mr. Stanley."

CHAPTER XVII.

A STARTLING REVELATION.

A MAN wrapped in an ample cloak stood before them the footman who had conducted him thither stealing noiselessly away.

"I am Mr. Wylie's messenger," answered the man coolly; "he has sent me to summon Mr. Verne, Miss Verne, yourself and this lady, as you are all interested in the communication he has to make."

Coila uttered a genuine French hiss and made a sudden movement as if to fly. The messenger put out his arm and barred the way, with a quiet:

"Not so fast, madam. My orders are not to lose sight of you."

She stood glaring at him for a moment, her hands clinched and her teeth buried in her lip; then regaining her composure, she went back to Stanley.

"There is a conspiracy against me, Monsieur Stanley," said she. "I have known it, and the man Wylie is at the bottom of it. Come, you shall hear both sides of the story, and if you love me, as you say," she added lowering her tones, "you will not recall your love from her who has risked so much to save you from sorrow and shame. Conduct me to the dressing-room and don't leave me with that insolent there."

In the dressing-room they found Maiblume and after securing their wraps, they drove away together in Mr. Verne's carriage, the messenger on the box beside the coachman. A servant led them to one of the smaller parlors where they found two gentlemen awaiting them. These were no other than our old acquaintance, Mr. Falcon, the solicitor, and Mr. Wylie the artist.

As the others clustered round these gentlemen, Coila's dark eyes traveled around the room and fixed themselves suspiciously upon the closed folding-doors which separated the next parlor from this.

She approached with rapid and noiseless step and was about to sweep them apart, when Wylie's long fingers closed on hers like a steel-trap.

"Pray don't leave us, dear Miss De Vouse," said he, his malicious eyes rolling in ecstasy. "I'll take off your wraps myself if you'll only consent to stay."

They all turned and looked at him with astonishment, as he led her, quiet and unresisting, to a sofa at the other end of the room, and took an arm-chair close beside her.

Mr. Falcon kept smiling affably, but in the meanwhile his piercing eyes were taking in every item of her appearance.

When all were seated, Mr. Falcon alone standing in an obsequious attitude, and prefacing his remarks with a little bow and cough, he said:

"This is rather a disagreeable business, ladies and gentlemen, but the best way is to get through with it as quickly as possible. I am the lawyer who drew up the late Mrs. Stanley's will; Mr. Stanley will remember how surprised I was at its disappearance. I knew that the late Mrs. Stanley could not have destroyed it herself, and, in fact, I vowed that I would find out the mystery if it took me ten years to do it. I never was so affronted in my life," said Mr. Falcon, casting a look of meek reproach upon Mr. Stanley, "as when my word was doubted and I couldn't prove it true. I kept worrying my head about that affair, but couldn't neglect my business to follow it up. At last I thought of Wylie here, an old chum of mine, who had spoiled the best detective ever born with eagle's eyes, by turning artist, and as I knew he was ordered by his physicians to idle about for a year, and that he had an uncommon relish for solving a mystery, I went to him and just told him all about it, and he promised to run the thing down by way of wholesome pastime and to oblige an old friend. This is all I've got to do with the business. Wylie will now tell his experience."

Mr. Falcon retired modestly to a chair which he

placed directly in front of the folding-doors, nodding and smiling to his friend to proceed.

Before he had opened his mouth, Coila's white face bent closer to his.

"Monsieur," muttered she, in a voice inaudible to all the others, "you do not break your word to me, do you? There are still two days."

"All right!" drawled he, in his usual distinct tones; "I ain't the one to betray the innocent."

She sunk back, closing her eyes.

"My story may be interesting," began he, glancing toward the group across the apartment with more of respectful seriousness than he had ever yet shown, "but I dare say it won't be an agreeable one for all parties. We must take the good with the bad, however, and be thankful that guilt has such a trick of peeping out from under its vail, however cleverly drawn around it. Having got hold of Falcon's case, the first thing I did was to look up the pre-histories of all parties concerned. To be candid, Mr. Stanley was the one Falcon and I were most apt to suspect of having destroyed the will, for he was the only one who seemed to have a motive, and his life I took the liberty of sifting pretty thoroughly. Finding nothing to go upon in that direction, I did the same by Mr. George Laurie, and discovered such a character as—Jerusalem! But that don't come in here.

"Finding nothing to the purpose on that track either, I ventured to put my sacrilegious finger into one of the ladies' pies—in fact, to furnish myself with the charming biography of Mademoiselle Coila De Vouse.

Stanley scowled like a thunder-cloud, and striding across the room took his place by Coila's side.

"Take care, sir," said he; "you're on dangerous ground!"

"All right!" drawled Mr. Wylie; "I'll get over it as fast as possible."

Coila turned to Stanley with a look of angelic suffering and patience.

"Let him speak," sighed she. "He will ruin poor Coila, with all she holds dear on earth, but he cannot rob her of the sweet thought that she has sacrificed herself for love of them!"

"From certain suspicious trifles in her life with Mrs. Stanley," said Mr. Wylie, chuckling and pressing his palms together as if he held between them some very precious secret, "I thought it best to take a trip to France to pursue my inquiries. At first I went on a wild-goose chase to the *Pension* at St. Omer, where Miss De Vouse claimed to have got her education, but the sisters assured me they had never had a pupil of that name there, nor could they recognize her photograph—a very excellent one, by Sarony, which I had taken the liberty of abstracting from the late Mrs. Stanley's album. I was certainly stumped there; and wandered about among the Paris photographers for some weeks without the smallest success. One day I saw an advertisement in a paper which set me thinking in a new track. It was by one of those chaps who profess to make people over again—that is, to turn out from his establishment a fair young creature of sixteen who entered a grizzly griffin of fifty. I took the trouble to post myself in the thing, and, having paid my char-woman, a perfect Medusa, to consent to the transformation, I took her to Monsieur Gorget and had her operated upon in my presence. Well, he gave her a new face, new neck, new arms, and the loveliest crop of black curls I ever saw; he filled out her sunken cheeks; he put in the teeth she wanted; he gave her glossy, arched eyebrows—hers were red, and coarse as a coconut's fiber—he painted out her parchment hide by painting on a porcelain complexion with delicate veins that would have deceived the very Old Boy. All this was done for the moderate sum of five hundred francs! My char-woman returned home with me such a Venus that her own children did not recognize her. After this experiment, instead of haunting the photographers' galleries, I haunted the establishments devoted to

this branch of art, and diligently showing my picture of Mademoiselle De Vouse, had the beatitude of at last meeting the potent gen^l whose wand had given her the charms you now see and admire."

At this point a shriek broke from Coila; there was a swish of rent satin and a flash of lurid drapery, as with clinched hand she struck him in the face.

"Wretch! Thou liest! Thou liest!" cried she, wildly. "Monsieurs, do you stand by and see me insulted?"—turning to the others in passionate appeal. "Oh, *misere*, what black conspiracy is this! Will no one stab this base hound to the heart?"

No one moved; horror and amazement sat upon every face but the lawyer's and the artist's; they only interchanged a grin of malicious triumph.

"Sit down, madam," said Stanley, in a strange voice; "let us hear the end of this man's tale."

She put a sudden forced constraint upon herself; she approached him, her hands out, her most dependent, her most seductive manner in full play.

"Save me, Monsieur Paul!" said she, in thrilling tones. "You who have won my promise to be your wife, protect me from these insults; upon your chivalry I cast myself, monsieur."

She dropped before him, white and sweet, her *coiffure* of brilliant dyes and glancing gems, only bringing out her pathetic manner into strong relief. She had appealed to the man's chivalry, and his chivalry awoke at her word.

He rose, drew her hand through his arm and haughtily faced the rest.

"Mademoiselle De Vouse has promised to be my wife, and under these circumstances I refuse to allow Mr. Wylie to utter another syllable to her discredit."

Mr. Verne, who had involuntarily started forward with a confused idea of comforting and protecting her in her distress, stopped in stupefaction, his hands to his temples, looking from one to the other.

Maiblume, too, lifting her bending figure, flashed a keen glance of dawning mistrust at the little siren.

Mr. Falcon broke the silence:

"I believe I had the honor of telling Mr. Stanley in the outset that this affair could not be agreeable to all parties concerned; and I hope he will allow us to proceed with the disclosure of the imposition which has been practiced upon himself and Mr. Verne, especially when he learns that it is indissolubly connected with the late Mrs. Stanley's secret, and with the disappearance of her will."

Stanley flushed darkly, then grew ashy pale. He looked at Coila in a sort of fascination—irresolution in his shrinking eye.

He disengaged himself; he took her by the chilly finger-tips and reseated her.

"I have a right to hear this story," said he, in a voice that struck like death to her heart. "If you are innocent, you have nothing to fear."

She cowered down, and crossing her arms on her knees, rested her ghastly face upon them.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE KNIGHT APPEARS.

MR. WYLIE proceeded:

"Mr. Gorget, naturally proud of his skill, had in his possession a photograph of Mademoiselle Coila De Vouse before his magic brush had touched her, and another taken after the transformation. Both were admirably tinted, and did full justice to the subject, and, in fact, here they are, with the Frenchman's affidavit that they were taken from the same original."

He took from the same envelope which we once before saw in his hand, two photographs and placed them in Mr. Stanley's hand—Mr. Verne, joining him hurriedly to look at them over his shoulder.

The first, marked "before treatment," represented a small, spare woman, with an undeniably good outline, and small, graceful hands and feet, but with gaunt neck and arms, hollow cheeks, bloodless yellow

complexion, dark shadows under the eyes, and thin, light-brown hair.

The other, marked "after treatment," represented the plump, beautiful Coila, whose graces we have admired so long.

Dissimilar as these pictures were there was a nameless resemblance between them—the same Coila looked at them from each *carte*.

Both gentlemen recoiled from the unhappy original, struck by the genuine Saxon disgust at imposture.

Maiblume, reddening to the roots of her hair, turned her back upon Coila.

Mr. Wylie went on with increasing spirit:

"Mr. Gorget put me on the right track at last; he told me who his client was, occupation, family connections, etc., etc. She was attached to the Paris *cirque*, and on the play-bills figured as the Beautiful Queen of the Air, Bebe Baron, alias Coila De Vouse, the daughter of the drunken host of a *brasserie*, in the Rue St. Martin. As I was anxious to give her full justice in her biography, I took the trouble to visit the manager of the troupe to which she had belonged, and, after some slight difficulty, which was adjusted by the aid of the almighty dollar, he confided in me. He was a miserable fellow, a confirmed opium-eater, but he had once been a gentleman, though always a base and vicious one. He informed me that Bebe Baron had of late years been too many for him, and, being a very valuable star, he had been obliged to accede to her most preposterous demands—in fact, that she was mistress and more, and twirled him round her little finger. Some two years and a half ago, the distressed manager had been plunged into further trouble by a circumstance connected with his past life starting up in the most unexpected manner. He met, face to face, one day in the street, a lady whom he had cruelly wronged in those days when he was a gentleman, and the sight of her, beautiful as ever, and passing him by without recognition, almost took away the little reason which opium had left him. He followed her to her hotel, forced an interview, and almost killed her by the shock of seeing him. She had married another, was wealthy, and loved her husband. You may suppose how the sight of this dissipated, worthless wretch appalled her, possessed as he was of a fact in her history which she had never dared divulge to her husband.

"The man urged her to return to him, threatening her with exposure if she refused; but she, struck with unutterable loathing, declared she would die by her own hand first, and defied him. He would have carried his threat into execution, had he not recollected the emptiness of his coffers; so, extorting her address from her, and as much gold as she could give him, he left her for that time."

Stanley, with convulsed face, sprung from his seat and paced about the room.

"You are talking of my wife," he said, in a choked voice, as he paused before the artist with clinched hands.

Wylie hesitated, flushing scarlet.

"Wait, sir; don't be premature," urged he; "you will only prejudice the case if you do."

"I know you are talking of my wife!" said Stanley, in a hollow voice. "She had a secret which she kept from me from the first day of her marriage. Two years and a half ago we were in Paris, and she had an illness there for which she could assign no cause. I know you speak of Mrs. Stanley!"

"Be patient, I pray you!" cried Wylie, warmly. "Think nothing, but wait for the end."

Stanley turned on his heel, and grinding his teeth, commenced a weary march up and down the room.

"Upon reflection," continued Mr. Wylie, "the man resolved to forego vengeance, and make his victim pay for the self-sacrifice. He commenced a system of blackmailing which lasted until she sent him word, a year ago, that she had resolved to confess all to her husband. Miss De Vouse here reappears upon the scene. Discovering that her em-

ployer was in trouble, she wormed the whole secret out of him, and suggested a new course to be pursued. She proposed that she should be sent as the circus manager's agent to the home of the unfortunate lady, in order that she might maneuver matters so that the secret would still be kept from the husband and the hush-money still continue to be paid. She had her way, and a year ago landed in New York, sent for their victim, found her wavering still between fear and duty—forced her to receive her as her honored guest—and burst upon society, the young Mademoiselle De Vouse, beauty and witch, nestling under the protecting wing of the unhappy, yet *guiltless*, Mrs. Stanley."

He paused, having uttered these words italicized with extraordinary energy—and they all stirred, as if moved by one spirit, and looked at one another with a low deep gasp of intense relief.

Guiltless!

Oh, sweet dead, sorrow-slain, yet spotless; sleep on—thy sacred memory held pure as light!

As that deep breath passed away, Coila raised her wild face, rose, and stood before them, dejected.

"Now hear me," said she. "Let me take up the story here; let me expiate all and I shall go from your presence with one gleam of comfort to light my darkened path."

She looked from one loathing face to another; every eye avoided hers. Oh, agony—she the admired, the beloved, to stand abhorred in their midst!

"I came—I saw madame—I loved her, Monsieur Wylie knows. I have told him how my health was changed. I pitied my madame; I helped her to bear her secret and to hide it from Monsieur Stanley. On her death-bed she tells me that she has written a confession, which I am to give to monsieur after her death, and then to place it in her coffin that it may be buried with her; also a will to which the confession is a key. She tells me that Monsieur Laurie has discovered her secret long ago, and has ever urged her to be brave and confide in Monsieur Stanley, so that he and she and the man in Paris and Coila, are all who know the little history, which, if breathed to others, will blow her good name away.

"She dies; I retire to think; I mourn; my heart is torn with pity; her fair fame seems more precious to me than this useless babbling of a bygone misfortune to the ears of a husband who will only loathe her memory because of it. I steal through the house, bring her desk to my room, then I take out the confession and the will from madame's desk, and, with many prayers and tears, I place the will, to which the confession is the key, in madame's coffin; but the confession—yes, if I preserve that madame's purity may still be vindicated, should Monsieur Laurie ever be coward enough to betray her. Monsieur my employer I silence by revealing to him madame's death, and by sending him a regular allowance as long as he leaves me unmolested among the purer influences which surround me now.

"For the rest, I have dared to give Monsieur Verne my deathless gratitude—to hold Mademoiselle Verne dear as my own life—to attempt the vindication of Monsieur Laurie, and, for the dear sakes of these two, to divert Monsieur Stanley from his pursuit, to lose my heart to him, and to promise to be his wife. These are my crimes, oh, friends, oh, judges! Can repentance, can bitter tears never wash them out? Is there no mercy for me?"

Another breathless pause, while doubt and compassion struggle for the precedence in the breasts of her audience, by which term, however, I dare not include the lawyer and his friend, for they only looked at each other like leering satyrs.

Maiblume was the first to move. She hurried forward and stopped, looking earnestly at her father.

"Papa," said she, in a thrilling voice, "don't let us be cruel! Who is there among us who does not need forgiveness? Dare we deny it to her?"

The author started to his feet, generous pity obtaining the mastery over him. Stanley, too, was

moved, and turned toward the suppliant, when Mr. Wylie stretched out his hand with an emphatic:

"Wait a moment, please; you have not heard all."

Coila De Vouse gave him one look of bitter hatred, and folding her arms, stood like a statue in the middle of the floor.

"Justice must first be done to Mrs. Stanley's memory," said Mr. Wylie, waving his hand at Mr. Falcon; "the rest of the circumstances about to be disclosed follow in due sequence."

Mr. Falcon rose, removed his chair, opened the folding-door a little way, and beckoned.

A man entered.

His skin was like parchment, his eye dull and slumbrous, his bones stood out like those of a skeleton. A terrible man! He wore a suit of ill-fitting clothes, and leaned upon a stout staff—the very personification of miserable debility.

Coila emitted a fierce French execration.

"*Tout bien! Mademoiselle Bebe,*" said he, bowing low and sneeringly; "thou wert ready to play thy master false. Thy perfidy returns upon thee!"

"This," said Mr. Wylie, "is Emile Armand, the circus manager, employer of Coila De Vouse, and lawful husband of Rosa Cresswell, known as the wife of Paul Stanley. Armand, show your proofs!"

He laid the yellowed papers down upon the table. There they were; the marriage-certificate of Emile Armand and Rosa Cresswell, married in London, fifteen years ago!

Other papers, too, he laid beside them—a packet of letters written by Coila De Vouse in New York to her accomplice Emile Armand, in Paris, concerning the secret of the so-called Mrs. Stanley, and the money they extorted from her to keep it.

These having been examined in moody silence, at a sign from Wylie, Armand proceeded:

"Messieurs, I ever admired Madame Armand, who, for love of me, had eloped with me from her rich and proud family; but she soon ceased to give me wifely submission or love, because she was—well—Puritan, poor madame, and I had my niche in French society, and would not step down from it at her pleasure."

"He was a spendthrift, and a gambler," explained Mr. Wylie; "that's about the English of it."

"Our tastes being so dissimilar," continued the Frenchman, with serenity, "I permitted my wife to return to her father's house, where she was received upon condition that she would resume her maiden name, and conceal her marriage with Emile Armand. We lived in admirable concord apart for some time, until beginning to feel my rope gall—"

"Falling in love with another woman," put in Mr. Wylie, as before.

"I took advantage of my natural ingenuity, and released myself by sending her undoubted proofs of my death. I never heard of her again until I met her in the street in Paris, nearly twelve years afterward, when I permitted myself the felicity of renewing our acquaintance."

"That's enough, my man; you can take yourself off now," said Mr. Wylie.

And, with a profusion of polite bows to the assembled company, he retired through the folding-door.

Stanley's face was in his hands; Verne was leaning in mute sympathy on his shoulder; Maiblume's tender tears were falling softly.

Wylie wiped his hot brow and heaved a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"That's done!" muttered he to Falcon, who bowed and smiled in his most affable manner.

"Justice must now be done to Mr. George Laurie," said Mr. Wylie, after allowing sufficient time for his audience to recover themselves, and here a flush began to dawn on Maiblume's cheek.

"Before he was in your employ, Mr. Verne, you remember he was secretary or book keeper, or something of that sort, in one of the sanitary institutions in New York State—the Havisham Home for Incurables it was called. During his stay there he

had often noticed a little cripple—a poor boy whose limbs had been useless from his babyhood, and who had always lived there, having, the matron said, neither father nor mother, but being supported by a benevolent lady, who often came to see him.

"Having obtained a situation with you, Mr. Laurie was one day astonished to see a lady in your drawing-room whose face bore such a striking resemblance to the boy's that he could do nothing but gaze at her, until she noticing him asked something about him from Miss Verne and heard that he had come from the Havisham Home. This was Mrs. Stanley and the boy was Aubrey Armand, the fruit of her unhappy marriage, whom she had all her life kept concealed. She understood too well the reason of the secretary's agitation—he had stumbled upon her secret. She sought him at the first opportunity, and throwing herself upon his mercy, begged him to keep silent what he knew, telling him the sad circumstances. It was then that he acted a gentleman's and a true man's part; he promised to keep silent, but from the first day of his knowledge of the matter he never ceased to urge her to go to her husband and bravely declare the truth. You all know with what faithfulness Mr. Laurie preserved the poor lady's secret. You all know how he has suffered, and what a brave, patient spirit he has shown through all."

Maiblume's tears were falling like rain, but an April smile lighted up her lovely face.

Stanley, too, looked up, his dark face kindling, while Mr. Verne, beaming like a happy child, cried:

"Bravo! bravo! I knew he'd come out right!"

"Stop!" said Mr. Wylie, hugging himself anew.

"There's more yet! One evening, when Mr. Laurie and Miss Verne were walking on the beach at Storm-cliff, their conversation—an interesting one, I believe—was interrupted by Aubrey Armand starting up from among the rocks, the boy with Mrs. Stanley's own face right in front of Miss Verne! You may imagine the fix the fine fellow was in—how to get him away without Miss Verne's seeing him distinctly, and how to explain the thing satisfactorily afterward. I guess he didn't manage very well, either, for they haven't been such friends since. Well, he hid the boy between two big rocks, and after he had seen Miss Verne home, he went back to him and heard his story. No money had come to pay his expenses at the Home for six months; and being a high-spirited little fellow, and besides, passionately attached to the lady who visited him, he could not bear their cold looks, and so ran away, hoping to find the lady who was in her grave. He had wandered about for more than three weeks, and was just about gone when he came to Storm-cliff, and, to his joy, recognized Mr. Laurie on the beach. Of course the first thing to be done was to provide for Aubrey without letting anybody who had ever seen Mrs. Stanley see him; and Mr. Laurie, true to his trust, took this upon himself. He got a wagon from the village and drove him over to Linsdale, where he housed him comfortably for the night, and, making inquiries for some out-of-the-way place where he might nurse the little fellow in secrecy for the present, he heard of the old ruin on the top of the hill, and next evening went up to look at it. It ended in his carrying the boy up there on his back, I believe, and making him as comfortable as human hands could in such a place. Then he wrote to his mother, who is living in Florida, asking leave to take the little waif to her, which she frankly gave him, being exactly the woman to have such a son. Meantime he had left your employment, sir, sorrowful enough, I dare say, that his duty should be so hard, none the less resolved to do it for that. I guess I have said enough on this subject," observed Mr. Wylie, rolling his eyes round the excited, beaming faces, "unless you'd like me to say where this young hero is to be found now."

"Yes—yes—that's it!" cried Mr. Verne.

Mr. Wylie made a sign to Mr. Falcon, who again opened the folding doors and beckoned.

George Laurie came in.

Pale with excitement, yet smiling radiantly, dear, faithful George, tender and true!

They rushed at him, author and poet together, and while Mr. Verne hugged him in his arms, crying and laughing, Mr. Stanley wrung his hand convulsively, exclaiming over and over:

"God bless you, Laurie! Can you ever forgive me?"

"Go, boy, there she is!" cried Mr. Verne, at length, pushing him toward the angelically-beaming Maiblume; and as they clasped hands, pure heaven in their hearts—he sat down, sobbing like a child.

CHAPTER XIX.

KNIGHTED IN LOVE.

COILA became impatient of these raptures.

"Am I permitted to retire now?" said she breathing hard.

"On the contrary, you are very particularly pressed to remain," said Mr. Wylie, and raising his voice, called—"Officer!"

The messenger entered without his cloak.

Alas! His coat was blue, his buttons were brass, and he carried a short truncheon in his hand!

"Arrest that woman if she attempts to move!" said the inexorable Wylie.

The officer took his place beside Coila.

"The night before the storm at Stormcliff," resumed the artist, "Miss De Vouse visited the ruin where Aubrey Armand was hidden, accompanied by a woman, rather a rough character, from Linsdale, of the name of Louisa Garth. She stole the child in Mr. Laurie's absence, recognizing at a glance his likeness to Mrs. Stanley. She also set the ruin on fire, that Mr. Laurie might be induced to believe that the child had perished in the flames. I had seen her go, and when she denied having gone I suspected at once the effect the discovery had had upon her. Next morning the steamer Simplic was wrecked on the bar at Stormcliff and Armand was tossed ashore at her very feet. Taking advantage of her terror at his appearance, I wrung from her the information for which alone I had made her acquaintance—I mean what she had done with Mrs. Stanley's will. Read the will, Falcon, will you?"

Mr. Falcon drew a leather case from his breast pocket, opened it and produced the mildewed packet which had lain for eight months under the dead lady's pillow, and opening it read in a sounding voice the testamentary wishes of Rosa Stanley.

The will was brief; it simply and concisely settled a life interest in Mrs. Stanley's fortune on her beloved and only son, Aubrey Armand, with the reversion of the whole fortune to her true friend, George Laurie, referring to the confession which was to be found with the will in her desk for explanation.

"To hide this will," said Mr. Wylie, "became a necessity of Miss De Vouse, who had set her heart on marrying a wealthy widower. This will not having appeared, the property fell in due time into the hands of Mr. Stanley, and Mr. Stanley fell in due time into the hands of Miss De Vouse. When Miss De Vouse recognized Aubrey Armand, the heir, she saw it was about time to quit or make a fresh start, so she sent that boy, half-dead as he was, right along to New York with Louisa Garth as jailer, and hid him in an attic in First avenue. I'd my eyes on her, though, and with the assistance of Constable Johnson here, we tracked her last night, between one and two in the morning, making her way with the woman Garth to the hole where the poor boy was shut up. Well, it ain't worth while to say much more, I guess. They thought they had drowned him in the river, but we were handier than they imagined, and fished him up again. Poor little chap, he'll never be nearer gone! That's why I played you false, you little Hecate!" exclaimed Mr. Wylie, turning upon her with anger and admiration struggling for the mastery. "If you'd behaved yourself I couldn't have served you so, for

you'd played your part so well. Off with her!" added he to the policeman; "I guess we've had enough of her!"

As the officer's hand touched her she quietly put on her white camel's-hair shawl, draping it about her face and throat as delicately as if she were going to the opera; then, drawing herself to her tiny height, she looked at them all with flashing hatred and scorn.

"Messieurs, my judges," said she, "and Made-moiselle Purity, I defy you all! Fate mocks me now, the jade; but wait, her wheel shall turn again, and I shall soar higher than ever. I was to have been married to Monsieur Paul Stanley to-day! Ha! ha! His passion was amusing, but I would have wearied of it in a week! Adieu! I shall find equal amusement in the—ha! ha!—Tombs; for my mind is my kingdom, and it never forsakes me!"

With a sweeping stage bow, and a jaunty wave of the hand, she disappeared, her light hand on the officer's arm and her train sweeping behind her.

"There is only one more thing to be done connected with this matter," said Mr. Wylie, when all were breathing freer and the sound of the officer's carriage-wheels was no more heard; "in her absence this evening, and armed with a search-warrant, Johnson and I went through her effects, and we came upon this packet—Mrs. Stanley's confession, I believe."

He handed a sealed envelope to Stanley, who read these words on the back:

"To be read by my husband only. Finder, respect the seal."

Stanley held it in his trembling hand, musing with profound emotion over the sad, sad history of the woman who had loved him so well.

"Friends," said he at last, breaking the respectful silence which they observed, "my wife's honor is already vindicated; I desire no other proof of her purity. In your presence let me burn this unread; it relates to a past which I should never have wished to unvail had not evil thoughts prompted the cruel suspicions which alienated me from her gradually and fatally. Thus I consign to oblivion my dead wife's secret."

He placed the packet in the heart of the glowing fire, and, in silence, they all watched it burn brightly—die out in lurid flakes and flutter up the chimney.

"And now, let me show you Aubrey," said George, turning for the first time from Maiblume.

The folding doors were both flung wide now, and they saw the child lying on a sofa, his miserable father slouching at a distant window and drumming the devil's tattoo on the sill.

George took him in his arms, a light weight truly, but love thrilled every fiber of the little form.

"My dear Aubrey," said George, "look up, look up. This is Maiblume, the lovely lady who is to be my wife."

And the boy looked up in the sweet bending face, and the next moment was in her arms.

"My little brother!" whispered she kissing him over and over again; "you and George and I shall never part from each other till God calls one of us."

And lying between them, Aubrey Armand, too frail for such a strong elixir as complete happiness, swooned away.

Meantime Stanley, in a few terse sentences, was disposing of Monsieur Armand to his entire satisfaction—in fact buying his son of him. Having agreed to an exorbitant demand, and seen him out, he returned to his old friend Verne, who stood near the sofa quite upset by the little scene he had witnessed.

"We shall be old chums still," said Stanley, linking his arm in his, and leaning on him with a wistful dependence new in him; "and for these three, may God shower His richest blessings on them and spare them to each other many years."

"Amen!" said the author, wringing his hand.

THE END.

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